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### What Do We Mean By the Term “Central-Eastern Europe”?

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The term Central-Eastern Europe is, to a large extent, only a consensual term, a result of an agreement between various specialist viewpoints. It owes its existence to the need to give a name to an area that belongs neither to the West nor to the East. It is, rather, a “middle zone” between the East and the West; that is what some authors call it. The term itself is a borrowing from geography, although neither geographers nor politicians agree about the delineation of the region that the term is supposed to refer to. The term Central-Eastern Europe has been used in two meanings: either for the entire region between the Baltic, Adriatic, Aegean and Black Seas bordering on ethnically German and Russian territories (albeit with certain variations), or only for the *heartlands* of the area (to use the term employed by Timothy Garton Ash), i.e. the territories of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. It is these three countries that this book will be dealing with.

The borders of Poland, the Czech lands/Czechoslovakia and historical/contemporary Hungary have moved, expanded and contracted many times in history. So in different periods they encompassed the territory of not only the present-day Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine, but also parts of the former Yugoslavia and Romania. We should also bear in mind the close ties of a large part of the region with Austria and the Habsburg dynasty that ruled there.

The concept of Central-Eastern Europe is a new one. For a long time, Europe was not divided into East and West. In ancient times, the dominant contrast was that between the civilisation of the Mediterranean south and the barbarity of the north. In the Middle Ages, although there were two Roman Empires, the Eastern and the Western, people at that time did not think in terms of an East-West division. That did not begin to take on a more distinct shape before the 19th century; at that time quarrels raged in Russia between the so-called Slavophiles and the so-called Occidentals, people advocating Western ideas, etc. Those quarrels were the reason why, some time later, many historians accepted the cultural-cum-religious criterion to justify the dualistic approach to the European past. The Orthodox Church heritage of Byzantium set the direction of development in one part of the continent, while Roman-Germanic civilisation, irrespective of whether on Catholic or Protestant soil, set its seal on the development of the other part. But what can we say about a territory which, although belonging to the West from the cultural and religious points of view, was perceived by most as a part of Eastern Europe? The terminological ambiguity became more and more obvious.

After the Second World War, the term “Eastern Europe” became practically a synonym for the Soviet Bloc. In this way, the dependence of the region on the Soviet Union received a kind of historical justification, because it seemed that individual countries of the region, which could not exist independently, became a part of the Communist empire headed by Russia as if in compliance with their historical predetermination. Some people even talked about “organic links” between Moscow and its neighbours, and Communism in this part of Europe looked like a road to modernity. Opinions began to change in the late eighties; people began to speak about a space of “great co-stagnation”, as the American historian Joseph Rothschild called it, and the Soviet dominance began to be considered anachronistic and destabilizing.

Oskar Halecki, a Polish historian working in the United States, came out against the use of the term Eastern Europe, which wiped out the difference between Russia and the rest of the countries of the region, and proposed a new terminology. In his books *Borderlands of Western Civilization* and *The Limits and Divisions of European History*, published in the 1950s and 1960s, he proposed a historically grounded division of Europe into four parts: Western, Central-Western, Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe. The term Central-Eastern Europe was slightly cumbersome and, although considered correct by a number of scholars, it failed to replace the term Eastern Europe, which became widespread particularly in connection with the Cold War. The terminology devised by Halecki was further developed and its individual elements re-defined about twenty years later by the Hungarian scholar Jenő Szűcs, who rejected the term Central-Western Europe in his work *The Three Historical Regions of Europe*. Roughly at the same time, writers and thinkers from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, namely Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz and György Konrád, began to coin still another term: Central Europe. They suggested that the word “Eastern” implied a forcible separation of that region from the rest of Europe. Kundera even expressly protested against what he called the “perfidious vocabulary”, vehemently emphasizing that “the Central Europe designation denotes the fact of belonging to the West”.

Indeed, both the Czech lands (later Czechoslovakia), historical/contemporary Hungary and Poland always belonged to Western civilisation. Christianity and all that was connected with it came to these countries from Rome, in other words, Western influences there were dominant, and determined the further development. At the same time, we must bear in mind that Byzantium also shared in the Christianization of this part of Europe: at the beginning of the second half of the 9th century, it sent two missionaries to Moravia, Konstantin (Cyril) and Methodius, and in the early Middle Ages, Christianity of the Eastern Church type was quite influential in the territory of the Czech lands, historical Hungary, Croatia and some parts of Poland. In spite of that, the countries of Central-Eastern Europe did finally become a part of the West. They developed and constituted themselves under the influence of the great historical processes and streams the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, French Revolution and Industrial Revolution. They were markedly different from

such Eastern states as Muscovy or the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over the Balkans for centuries. The well-known Russian historian George Vernadsky, working in Yale, said that “if Russia is Europe then only partly so”. The Moscow despotism, with the Church subservient to the state, was alien to Western traditions, just as the Islam-based Ottoman Empire was. It therefore comes as no surprise that historical Hungary and Poland, bordering with both Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire, considered themselves - and were also considered - the foremost bastions of Christianity (*antemurale christianitatis*). So the eastern frontiers of Poland and historical Hungary were the frontiers of Europe.

It would, however, be a mistake to think of those frontiers as of something rigid or impenetrable. “The countries along the frontiers of Western civilisation,” to quote Halecki, i.e. Central-Eastern Europe, lay in the area where diverse cultures met. The above-mentioned influences of the Eastern Byzantine world took deep root in vast areas along the borders of Poland and historical Hungary, in the Ukraine, Belarus and Transylvania. Moreover, at the time when the Hungarians and the Poles became the most ardent defenders of Christianity, i.e. of the West, very strong oriental influences asserted themselves in their culture; a noticeable Turkish influence is discernible even in their national costumes.

When we use terms like “Western” or “Western European”, the concept of a rigid separating line will not do. A few words of explanation are in order. When we speak about the West, we usually mean economically and culturally developed countries such as France and England rather than the geographically westernmost Iceland, Ireland or Portugal. Halecki and Szücs’ cultural-cum-geographic-cum-historical model (Western, Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe) therefore needs to be complemented with one more paradigm, which was borrowed from economics and became widespread thanks to Hungarian scholars. It is built on the conceptual structure of a centre, semi-periphery and periphery, and its advantage is that countries lying in Central-Eastern Europe find their social and economic counterparts in the west, south and north. In this respect, we should note that the Polish historian Joachim Lelewel made a kind of comparative study of Poland and Spain already in the 19th century.

Europe always consisted of many zones at different levels of development that interacted with each other. The core of Europe stimulated and instigated competition in zones that were lagging behind. The nature of both the challenge and the response, however, changed. As a rule, the relationships between the zones favoured the core, the centre, although the result of the interactions was not always - or necessarily - colonial dependence further aggravating the peripheral regions’ backwardness. As time went by, some parts of the centre gradually lost their privileged position while other, hitherto peripheral, countries may have got closer to the centre if the conditions were propitious.

It seems remarkable that the size of the centre, which as a rule was not very big and whose development and the level achieved were, in many respects, extraordinary,

remained relatively unchanged over the centuries. Some historians use the density of settlement as the main criterion and deduce that in the 14th century the core consisted of Italy, northern and part of southeastern France, the Netherlands, western and part of southern Germany and southern England. If we look at a map, we shall see something in the shape of a long ribbon extending from Palermo through Naples and Antwerp to London. The semi-periphery lay along both sides of that ribbon, area or zone: southern France, Spain, Portugal, Brandenburg, the Czech lands, historical Hungary and Poland. The outer region, the periphery, included Scandinavia, Lithuania, Russia and the Balkans. From the mid 15th century to the end of the 17th century, the core was made up of England, the Netherlands, northern France and the Rhineland. The membership of other countries in the core is rather doubtful. The semi-periphery and the periphery did not change much. If we can agree on the gross national product as the yardstick for the 19th century, then we shall see that the centre moved to a slightly broadened western region that also included Switzerland and Sweden. An analogical map could also be drawn for the 20th century.

Throughout that time, Central-Eastern Europe belonged to that inserted zone, the semi-periphery: while the Czech lands were very near the centre, the eastern provinces of Poland and historical Hungary bore a closer resemblance to the periphery. Could this model, used most frequently in socio-economic and political history, also be suitable for, and applicable to, a study of cultural development? It is clear that quantitative criteria cannot be applied to culture directly, if at all; there must exist a relationship, although not always an obvious or direct one, between the level of socio-economic development and the cultural level attained. We may ask whether the majority of the main streams of European culture originated in the countries belonging to the centre. Were those streams and trends mainly received and further developed in Central-Eastern Europe, or were some of them also born there? The question is not at all easy to answer, but it would be a mistake to think that the Czech lands, Poland and historical Hungary were only passive members of the European community, that they only exploited its achievements without contributing anything in return. We must not forget the contribution in the spiritual area made by the Hussite movement in Bohemia, the concept of freedom and constitutionalism in Poland and in historical Hungary, and, last but not least, a kind of uncompromising idealism that was an inspiration for other countries. Surely the British historian Norman Davies did not appear to be biased in favour of the Poles when, at the peak of Solidarity’s influence, he called Poland the “permanent symbol of the moral goal in Europe”?

With the exception of a few periods, the socio-economic inequality between the centre and the periphery was accompanied by feelings of cultural supremacy in the West. Although there were some noteworthy exceptions, by and large the English, French and Italians came to look down their noses at the nations of Central-Eastern Europe. Their patronizing attitudes were of course very often rooted in unfamiliarity

and ignorance. The Poles, Czechs and Hungarians, on the other hand, mostly looked up to the West, particularly to France and England, with a mixture of admiration and envy. Whatever was “European”, which was the synonym for “Western”, was, in their eyes, worthy of praise and imitation. István Széchenyi, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian leader, denounced the laziness and backwardness of his fellow countrymen as “Eastern features” that needed to be got rid of. At the same time, that feeling of inferiority generated a need for some kind of compensation, which usually led to the glorification of national history and national exceptionalism and uniqueness compared with other nations. In different periods, the Poles, Czechs, and even Slovaks called their respective countries the heart of Europe. The Hungarians and the Poles considered themselves the defenders of the West. The feeling of being inadequately appreciated and ignored made them turn to spiritual ideals they contrasted with the materialistic and degenerate West. It goes without saying that different responses were generated in different periods, but the duality of their relation with the West, containing both the element of love and the element of hate, hardly ever changed.

Let us now have a closer look at what constitutes the difference of Central-Eastern Europe, what makes that region different from other parts of the continent. Where are the similarities and differences between the Hungarians, Poles, Czechs and other nations of that territory? The starting point of our considerations will be the historical and cultural notion of Central-Eastern Europe linked to the centre–periphery model. Where should the emphasis be placed? Does the key to understanding the history of the region lie in its exposed geographical location, having limited access to the sea and being menaced by external threats? Or is it desirable, in view of the heterogeneity and the mixture of nationalities, to concentrate on the ethnic aspect? Or is perhaps the delay in the socio-economic development a reason for the application of the modernization theory? Although it seems clear that each of the above concepts is applicable for the region, we should avoid the mistake of disregarding the richness and variety of historical processes in our search for their single common denominator. The French historian Fernand Braudel said, although in different circumstances, that “we must imagine a host of parallel histories layered on top of each other. It would be too simple and too ideal if a complicated truth could be reduced to the repetition of a single dominant model or pattern.”<sup>1</sup>

The delayed start and the cultural lag (the “civilisation youth”) of Central-Eastern European development are obvious. It was only in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the first major challenge from the West, i.e. Christianity, that the region in question became a part of the European medieval community and civilisation. It may be argued that the delay in establishing the Polish and Hungarian kingdoms was not all that great. True, the French monarchy of Hugo Capet, the English monarchy of Edward the Elder, the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, like the first German kings,

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<sup>1</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. New York 1975, vol. II, p. 392.

all appeared at about the same time. In the West, however, the monarchies were built on old foundations. In Central-Eastern Europe, moreover, the slight delay in adopting more advanced western models and norms was accompanied by what Szűcs calls “shallow ploughing”, by which he meant that the adoption and application of those models was, to some extent, only superficial. We shall return to this later.

The original distance separating the West from Central-Eastern Europe narrowed, if it did not disappear completely, in five centuries. Then the economic differences between the two European regions began to grow. Features characteristic of a relationship between the centre and its periphery increasingly rose to prominence as the models of agrarian situations began to differ and the West began to turn to proto-industrialization. There can be no doubt that the development in Central-Eastern Europe was greatly influenced by a “second serfdom”, although it is clear, on the other hand, that Marxist historians, who always placed much emphasis on economic determinism, oversimplified and even deformed the significance of that process. The result of this “second serfdom” was undoubtedly that the peasant character of societies in Central-Eastern Europe became their permanent characteristic. Peasants did not transform themselves into capitalist farmers, but retained their unique ethos, and also a conservative way of thinking, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We hasten to add that in this respect they were no exception, and had many features in common with peasants in the western and southern semi-peripheries: in Ireland, Spain and some parts of Italy.

Another characteristic feature of the region was that the development of some institutions frequently got ahead of the socio-economic reality, the Czech lands being, in very general terms, an exception. We might also say that more advanced forms of political organisation appeared and operated under conditions that were often far from ripe for them. The aristocratic political democracy in Poland existed within an archaic social structure. Talking about the situation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland, one historian said that “thought processes in Poland were much closer to the West than the situation of Polish industry”.<sup>2</sup>

A degree of provincialism in politics, an underdeveloped political culture and a missing consensus model (which is the pillar of the American system) seem to have been among the typical features of the region, where the distance between the educated elite and the masses of the population was considerably greater than in the West.

The proponents of the modernization theory point to incessant efforts at “catching up” with the more developed centre as the most important factor that in effect determined the direction of the development of the entire region. The proponents of this theory even see Central-Eastern European nationalisms as a reaction *sui generis*, i.e. a reaction to the backwardness of that part of the continent, and as a way of resolving socio-economic and psychological problems. The modernisation

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<sup>2</sup> J. Jedlicki, *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują?* Warsaw 1988, p.10.

process did certainly play an important role, but the usefulness of this methodological approach seems to be vastly overrated. The fascination with the concept of continuous efforts at modernisation (whose aim is not always easy to define) has led to excessive simplifications, even distortions. A good example in this respect is the Soviet type of industrialization, which was considered a modernization process although in some respects it was a backward step because it led to a “feudal” system of privileges and forced labour that was not much different from serfdom. Although similar attempts at finding analogies between modernization in Central-Eastern Europe and the so-called third world have produced some interesting results, they at the same time conceal some very fundamental differences.

Ethnic problems in Central-Eastern Europe were undoubtedly exceptionally complicated and compelling. Was it only because there were considerably more ethnic and language groups there, and that they were much more intermingled, than in the West? Italy, Spain, Britain and even France were also quite ethnically heterogeneous, but they were much more successful in giving more uniformity to their citizens. The oft-repeated statement that in the West it was the state that shaped the nation while in the East (which includes Central-Eastern Europe) it was the nation that shaped the state, is therefore only partly true. In fact nations were also shaped by the state in Poland and historical Hungary until the 19th century. The originally multi-ethnic “political nation” (consisting mainly of the numerically large aristocracy) later became Polish or Hungarian in the political and cultural meanings of the word. Shortly before the division of Poland, that nation began to lose its aristocratic character and to take on the appearance of a modern nation. The word “Pole” had two different meanings: it denoted both ethnic Poles and all the citizens in the state, irrespective of their ethnic or language origin, just like “the British” may refer to the English, the Scots or the Welsh.

What distorted the development of nations along Western European lines were interruptions in the existence of their statehood; in Poland, this was due to the triple division of the country. The consequence came in a shift towards a different concept of nation tinted with Romanticism and based on ethnic, cultural and linguistic criteria. That concept supported the development and *risorgimento* of nations that had either never had statehood (Slovaks) or had lost it at an early stage of their development. And so it happened that the shift of ethnic aspects to the foreground was not so much due to the multiethnic character of the old Polish, Hungarian or Czech states as to the interruption in the existence of their statehood.

Changes of frontiers, which were more frequent in the last century than at any time before, contributed to the growing feeling of confusion in people. A man who was born around 1900 in the town of Ungvár lived his childhood in the Austro-Hungarian empire (more precisely in its eastern part, in the Hungarian Kingdom). In 1918, however, he became a Czechoslovak citizen and his native town started to be called Užhorod. In 1939, he lived a few days in the state of Carpathian Ukraine, only to become a Hungarian subject again. From World War II until recently he was a

Soviet citizen. Ethnically, he may have been a Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Hungarian, German or Jew.

The distinction between nationality and citizenship, a thing almost unknown in Anglophone or Francophone countries, became a fundamental issue in the countries of Central-Eastern Europe. Very often, the state was even in opposition to the society, and *vice versa*. While the existence of a civil society has always been the characteristic feature of Western Europe, the concept of civil society in Central-Eastern Europe acquired a strong nationalistic flavour. The causes of this phenomenon lie principally in the periods of foreign rule. The civil society supported by national culture became a bulwark of national identity, which was threatened many a time by foreign rule or by foreign countries. Because of all these phenomena, the civil society, which traditionally defended pluralism and its autonomy against incursions by the state and was, consequently, considered the best guarantor of the rights of individuals, became the main defender of national identity in Central-Eastern Europe. This led to a certain uniformization and intolerance in the name of the common struggle against extra-national and anti-national forces. Marcin Król has characterized it as “the mentality of besieged Zbaraż”.

Interruptions of statehood were caused by events that became tragic symbols, like the defeat at Mohács in 1526 for the Hungarians, the lost battle at the White Mountain in 1620 for the Czechs, or the triple division of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795 for the Poles. As a result of the first of the above events, historical Hungary was divided into three parts for over 150 years. The second event put the very existence of the Czechs as a nation under threat. The third event wiped the Polish-Lithuanian state off the map of Europe: for more than 120 years, the Polish lands were divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia. We can therefore see that the question of continuity or discontinuity is crucial for the history of Central-Eastern Europe: it is what distinguishes the region from other parts of the continent.

The fact that the nations inhabiting this part of Europe were smaller than some other nations in Western Europe (but in no case smaller than all them) did not present any particular problem. The Netherlands, for example, did not have a large population either, and even Prussia was only a small state when it embarked on its political expansion. The awareness of how very few of them there were was very painful for the Czechs in the 19th century. Although they considered themselves a small nation surrounded by powerful enemies, the Hungarians spoke of their state as an empire. Only the Poles never, not even in the blackest moments of their history, considered theirs a small nation. It is therefore questionable that it was the size of nations in this region alone that led to the establishment of large states, conglomerates of nations, so characteristic of this part of the world. Two of them, the Habsburg monarchy and the Polish-Lithuanian Rzeczpospolita, started their existence as personal unions based on dynastic marriages. Both of the entities played a dominant role in Central-Eastern Europe for several centuries. The Polish-Lithuanian state was effectively a republic, with a king as its president. That republic,

Rzeczpospolita, existed owing to the will of an ethnically differentiated but authentically sovereign political nation. The Habsburg monarchy, with the Czech lands and historical Hungary a part of it from 1526 to 1918, was established principally on the basis of loyalty towards the ruling dynasty.

Another characteristic feature of Central-Eastern Europe, which was truly exceptional in its scope, was the presence of Germans and Jews there, and the interactions between the two groups and local nationalities. According to František Palacký, a historian of formidable reputation, the axis of Czech history was the confrontation between the Czechs and the Germans, rife with conflicts but also fruitful (“meeting and clashing, accepting and refusing”). Indeed, this antagonism and coexistence permeated the entire development of this country, from the early Middle Ages until the final expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia.

Although relatively smaller, German influences in Poland were also of crucial importance. Their character, however, was often misinterpreted. The attention of many Poles was focused on the German expansionary *Drank nach Osten*, and they emphasized its brutality and usurping character. The Germans, on the other hand, usually spoke of their mission to bring civilisation to developmentally backward Slavic lands. The reality, however, was more complicated. It involved conflicts and cooperation, the Germanization of Poles and the reverse process by the Poles among the Germans. Different again was the situation in Hungary. This country had large groups of German colonists who enjoyed a special autonomous status, e.g. in Transylvania, and maintained their identity. In some periods, the Germans living in these countries constituted the local middle class (this was true to a lesser extent in Poland) and influenced economic changes there. Germans (or, more precisely, Austrian Germans) played a very important role throughout the existence of the Habsburg monarchy.

While the Germans constituted a group functioning within the society, the Jews were a part of the society but, at the same time, a marginal, exogenous group, outsiders living in a world of their own, separated from the rest of the society by barriers of religion, language and customs. For many centuries, Central-Eastern Europe was the home of a large number of Jews who had fled persecution and oppression in other countries. At the beginning of the 17th century, Prague was the veritable capital of European Jewry, and Rzeczpospolita (called “Polin” by the Jews) played host to the largest Jewish community in the whole world. The Budapest of the 19th century, on the other hand, had the most numerous and the most dynamic community of Jewish intellectuals, whose import is incontrovertible.

It seems that relations between Christians and Jews in Central-Eastern Europe were less strained than in other parts of the continent. In Poland before the divisions they were even satisfactory, and there were also periods of satisfactory coexistence in the entire region. The Europe-wide Judeo-phobia seems to have existed here in a milder form, and the situation changed only in the late 19th century, when it changed to the present-day anti-Semitism. This development had various local and global,

political as well as economic causes; it opened the tragic chapter in history whose horrible epilogue came in the form of the holocaust during the Nazi occupation in World War II. Today it is difficult to meet a Jew in Poland, only a few of them live in the Czech lands or Slovakia, and their numbers in Hungary have dwindled. Anti-Semitism, which returned as an accompanying phenomenon of the convulsions of post-Communist changes, does not have socio-economic roots comparable with those existing before the war. No political stream today professes allegiance to anti-Semitism, but at times of instability and hardship, the Jew (a term, by the way, which is used very loosely) may become a welcome sacrificial lamb. Is this only a transitory phenomenon? It is too soon to give an answer.

Harsh living conditions are nothing new in this region; past centuries provide ample testimony to that. Kundera once spoke about the “experience of extremely condensed history”, which is a euphemism for struggle, oppression and misery. Central-Eastern Europe sometimes resembles a laboratory where different systems are being tested. An American expert on the Soviet system called the region in the period following World War II a “laboratory of neo-imperialism”; in the early 1980s, Poland was referred to as a “laboratory of political changes”. It seems that the laboratory metaphor can be used for different periods in history.

A considerable part of Central-Eastern Europe history is the history of the struggle for freedom. Violence used to come from the outside, the reason being the sensitive geographical location - on the periphery in the case of historical Hungary (as suggested by the historian Péter Hanák), at a location exposed to invasions from both the East and the West in the case of Poland, or vulnerable to encirclement by Germanic tribes in the case of the Czech lands. In all of these situations there was an added ideological element: external absolutism, so different from the domestic constitutionalism.

A high price had to be paid for the defence of freedom. Between 1794 and 1905, the Poles fought in six uprisings and one revolution, and paid for it with their blood, the devastation of their country, cultural decline and often exile. Their rallying cry “For your and our freedom” appealed to the solidarity of the oppressed. On a European scale, the Poles themselves were a model example of a nation fighting for its freedom. The 1848 Hungarian revolution was, on the one hand, a part of the pan-European “spring of nations”, and on the other a continuation of late 17th and early 18th century insurgencies. Generations of Czechs paid a high price for their struggle against the Habsburgs from 1618 to 1648, and their struggle can be considered their contribution to the general struggle of nations for freedom.

For a long time, freedom was interpreted as an attribute of the “political nation”, and had absolutely nothing to do with the masses of peasants. In effect, however, the peasant masses paid for the “golden aristocratic freedom”; of course the view that political and social freedoms cannot be separated from each other did not crystallize before the 19th century. What was of greater importance: national or social liberation? And what if there was a situation where the two freedoms were mutually

exclusive? As always, freedom has a price and somebody has to pay it: sometime it is the nation, sometimes a social class, sometimes the individual.

In the two decades of independence between the two world wars, the nations of Central-Eastern Europe grappled with the problem of putting freedom in harmony with the execution of power. This was particularly true in Poland, where resistance against foreign authority was so deeply embedded in people's minds that bending to the authority of even their own government was not an easy thing. In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, Prague centralism clashed with the demands for autonomy of the Slovaks, and with the political aspirations of the Germans. Although authoritative administrations in Poland and Hungary safeguarded independence, they also restricted the freedoms of their citizens. The horrors of World War II and the German occupation (and in Poland of the Soviet occupation as well) were a severe test; the Communist regimes that came afterwards posed an even greater threat to freedom - personal, social and national. Freedom became the rallying cry again in 1956 during the Hungarian uprising and the Polish crisis, at the time of the 1968 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, and then again in Poland in 1976 and 1980. The ethos of "Solidarity" was, to a large extent, based on the concept of freedom: "To be free means to be one's self", said the "field chaplain" of Solidarity, Professor Józef Tischner.

The year 1989 brought the downfall of the Soviet bloc, and Central-Eastern Europe regained its independence. And again it transpires that the taste of freedom is bitter and that the price that needs to be paid for it seems extraordinarily exorbitant. Economically ruined, socially devastated, corruption-ridden and demoralized by more than four decades of Communist rule, the nations of Central-Eastern Europe have found that freedom, democracy and pluralism are no panacea; rather, they are only a necessary precondition for the successful construction of a new reality. It has become obvious that the problems of post-Communist changes, be they economic, social or political, are enormous, and that the Poles, Hungarians, Czech and Slovaks are facing a test that may be the most difficult in their history. Will they pass muster in it? Will they try to overcome the difficulties by relying only on themselves, or will they try, through some kind of regional cooperation, to imbue the term "Central-Eastern Europe" with a new content? Will they again defend their former position, or will they gain a new position in Europe, perhaps in a united Europe? Only the future knows the answers to these questions, but the past may provide food for thought.

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