

East Central Europe. A Concise History

The recent acceleration of political, social and economic change in East Central Europe has drawn attention to a region whose nature and the very existence had not long ago seemed of little importance. What then is East Central Europe? The question of definition is a difficult one as is usually the case concerning borderlands whose historical developments show little continuity and an uncertain identity born from the conflict between aspirations and reality.

Many commentators explain the history of East Central Europe in terms of its geographical position. There is no doubt that geography conditions the historical development of any region or people. In fact open eastern frontiers of Europe allowed waves of Asiatic nomads to enter Europe and bring recurrent devastation. However, geography is not enough to explain the unique nature of East Central Europe. It may only explain some of differences that exist in a region that ranges from the Baltic to the Aegean Seas.

History defines the identity of East Central Europe better than geography. In ancient times, a clear division between the civilized world and the barbaric 'no man's land' ran along the frontier of the Roman world on the Danube and the Rhine. Therefore, some of the areas of today's Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Hungary shared the benefits of the Roman civilization. Following the division of the Roman Empire into its eastern and western halves, South-Eastern Europe found itself under the Byzantine influence. In early Middle Ages this frontier between the

two branches of Roman civilization solidified on the eastern border of the state of Charlemagne. In the early Middle Ages recurrent invasions by the Huns, Avars and Magyars not only destroyed the emerging nuclei of East Central European states, but these invasions and migrations also affected Western Europe as well. The 9th and the 10th century brought a rapid development of dynastic states in Central and Eastern Europe, namely the kingdoms of Bohemia, Poland, Hungary and Kievan Rus. The final split of Christianity into its western and eastern branches in 1054 completed the tripartite division of Europe: the Catholic West, the Catholic East-Central region and the Orthodox East. By the 15th century both parts of the continent were almost homogenous in terms of economic prosperity and cultural development. This can be traced by the chronology of the spread of printing houses across Europe.

The gap between the two parts of Europe started to grow again in the late 15th century. As a result of divergent social and economic changes there emerged an 'agrarian dualism in Europe'. West of the Elbe, a system of 'serf tenancy' gradually evolved into a market economy; east of the Elbe, however, the manor economy based on 'serf labor' became an economic fixture. Western Europe ceased to be self-sufficient in grain and started importing it from Eastern Europe. This confirmed stagnation and even regression of social conditions in the region's agriculture. Large estates grew at the cost of peasant-controlled plots. The landlords constantly extended the range of peasant labor services and tied them to the land. While Western Europe headed for industrial revolution, Eastern Europe saw the establishment of the „second serfdom". The feudal mentality became ingrained: economic resources, such as land and labor, evolved into a reflection of social and political status and not into a source of wealth. Political domination of the nobility prevented a natural development of mobile, income-oriented social groups. Because of this situation, socio-economic reform resulted only from crisis. The reform was initiated by 'enlightened' rulers. Therefore, economic retardation dominated East Central Europe into the modern period with the important exception of Bohemia.

At the beginning of the 19th century, East Central Europe was under the political rule of Russia, Turkey, Austria and Prussia. In the decades that followed the peoples of this part of Europe gradually emerged as independent actors. Exceptions to this are the Poles, Hungarians and some other peoples,

who had had a longer national tradition, these nations discovered their own ethnic identity. East Central Europe contains a bewildering array of peoples and languages. The Poles, Czechs and Slovaks form part of the West Slavonic language group. In the Balkans Slovenes, Serbo-Croatians, Macedonians and Bulgarians speak South Slavonic languages. Belorussians and Ukrainians are a part of the East Slavonic group. Although it includes Slavonic linguistic elements, the language of the Romanians belongs to the Latin (Romance) group. The Albanians speak Sqhiperi which descended from the ancient Illyrian tongue. Latvian and Lithuanian belong to the Baltic group of languages. Finally, the Estonians and Hungarians speak languages which are distant branches of the Ugro-Finnish group. All these languages use Latin characters, except for the Serbo-Croatian in Serbia, Byelorussian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian. Religion had also played an important role in defining national identity. Protestantism distinguished Estonians and Latvians from the Roman Catholic Poles, Lithuanians, Croats, Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks although in the Czech lands and Hungary Protestantism also left a legacy. Orthodoxy predominated among Belorussians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Ukrainians. The Bosniaks of Bosnia and Hercegovina and most Albanians followed Islam. The Jews were a separate phenomenon everywhere. East Central Europeans have always lived with the Janus-like qualities of nationalism. The peoples of the region tend to define nationalism in ethnic terms. It is very characteristic for cultures of the region to have developed two basic terms describing national phenomena: good 'patriotism', which is an understood loyalty to one's own nationality, and bad 'nationalism' which is an exaggeration of national feeling.

After World War I the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany created the conditions necessary to complete the emancipation of the region. The Versailles treaty system confirmed the reconfiguration of the political map of the region but did not prove to be a durable solution. The rise of totalitarian political systems in the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Russia and their subsequent collaboration (the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty of August 1939) put an end to independence in East Central Europe.

After World War II the Soviet Union controlled the fate of the entire region. The consequences of the Soviet takeover were far reaching, even in the western political discourse. Politicians and journalists began to refer to the region as 'Eastern Europe' or the 'Soviet Bloc'. At western universities

'Soviet and East European studies' came to the fore, submerging identity of the region and too often treating it as though it only existed as a Soviet bulwark in Europe. The most profound change, however, was the imposition of the Soviet model in East Central Europe. According to the Stalinist orthodoxy, communist rule strived to make uniform the countries of the region through the slavish imitation of Soviet political, economic and social patterns. Overwhelming nationalization, expropriation, social atomization, creation of neo-feudal social structures, impoverishment of spiritual life and atrophy of civic virtues became the vehicle for transforming the region. The Soviet Union dragged East Central Europe, the 'kidnapped West', eastward.

Nevertheless, communism failed to assimilate fully East Central Europe into the Soviet pattern. The sovereignty and the self-management system in Yugoslavia, Hungarian economic reforms, relative independence of Romanian foreign policy and the strength of the Catholic church in Poland were the most striking deviations from Soviet orthodoxy. The result of the survival of national attributes was the onset of a 'cycle of crisis'. The Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Polish October 1956, the 'Prague spring' of 1968, the Polish workers unrest in 1970 and 1976, as well as the rise of 'Solidarity' in Poland in 1980 were milestones of the 'Return to Diversity' in East Central Europe.

As a consequence of their complex history, the peoples of East Central Europe are best defined in terms of national identity rather than a regional one. Jerzy Jedlicki has recently coined the term 'Ceastropeans' to collectively describe the inhabitants of East Central Europe. This amusing term, however, has no basis in reality. Despite some elements of a common cultural, economic and political fate, in the consciousness of the people of East Central Europe there is hardly any manifestation of their regional identity. There are Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, but no „Ceastropeans”.

The increasing integration of Western Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s created a new framework for East Central Europe. The old Cold War certainties have ended but the question of defining the place of East Central Europe reopened. If there has ever been a constant element in the history of the region it has been the constancy of fundamental geopolitical change. The question therefore remains: what countries and peoples should be included in the broadest definition of the

region? There is no doubt that Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary form the core of East Central Europe. The Balkan states of Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania should also be included. In the north, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union to regain their place in the region. Germany, by virtue of its geographical situation and historical expansionism lies outside the region. In historical terms the eastern frontier has been far more amorphous. Perhaps in time it will become clear whether Ukraine and Belarus will leave the Russian orbit and join the states of East Central Europe. The Russian tradition of autocracy and imperialism distances Russia from the company of the East Central European nations. Austria is excluded from East Central Europe with its history at the centre of the Habsburg Empire and its postwar neutrality. The fortunes of Greece and Finland after the World War II have also been different from the states of the Soviet bloc to consider their identity with East Central Europe.

What then is East Central Europe: 'the east of the West or the west of the East'? Although the political domination of external powers is gone, East Central Europe still remains economically backward compared to Western Europe. In terms of political culture Western-style liberalism has rarely been experienced in the region, but its peoples profess the ethos of freedom and democracy. History has played a powerful role in shaping up the identity of East Central European nations but their future is still open.