Dissidence - doubt - creativity

Revisiting 1983

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The erstwhile students of 1989 have recently returned to the streets of Bucharest, Warsaw, Bratislava and Budapest to defend what they achieved three decades ago. But could the tragedy of Central Europe that Milan Kundera wrote about so compellingly in 1983 be repeating itself?

In November 1983, Milan Kundera published his famous essay on ‘The tragedy of Central Europe’. He spoke of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland as the West’s forgotten eastern border, ‘un occident kidnappé’, as in the original French headline. [1] Today the essay reads like the faint echo of a distant time, when Soviet power seemed firmly entrenched along the shores of the Vistula, Elbe and Danube rivers, and the West had long since resigned itself to the Iron Curtain that had by then divided Europe for almost four decades. Kundera discerned various divisions of Europe, between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, between individualism and creativity in the West, and its radical negation in Russia’s totalitarian civilization in the East. If there was a division between Western and Central Europe, it lay in the fact that Europe itself was about to forget its cultural identity and therefore perceived Central Europe only as a political regime. ‘In other words’, wrote Kundera, Europe ‘sees in Central Europe only Eastern Europe’. Kundera’s essay is deeply melancholic. Some lines sound uncannily familiar. He found it deplorable that ‘Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity’, as a ‘realm of supreme values’ based on the ‘authority of the thinking, doubting individual, and on an artistic creation that expressed its uniqueness’. According to Kundera, only Central Europe was still struggling to defend this ‘past of culture, the past of the modern era’.

1983 was the year that martial law was lifted in Poland. In the Kremlin, ailing general secretary Yuri Andropov began to lose his grip on power, while in Bonn chancellor Helmut Kohl managed to stabilize the new coalition government, seeing it through early federal elections. The West German peace movement reached its peak and Ronald Reagan vilified the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’, a hesitant Soviet lieutenant colonel averted nuclear retaliation against what his computers mistook for an American missile strike. The TV-film The Day After showed what the results of a real global nuclear war might look like. One week after this apocalyptic vision was first broadcast, Kundera’s essay came out. It sparked a vivid pan-European debate on Central Europe’s identity and
on how to overcome bloc confrontation. It widened the cracks in the Iron Curtain and, for a brief moment in history, restored the very realm of culture - that of the thinking, doubting individual - whose demise it had powerfully condemned. At the climax of the Cold War, it marked the beginning of the Cold War’s end. As it turned out, Kundera’s laments concerning the abandonment of the Enlightenment had been somewhat premature.

Since then, Europe’s divides have taken a different shape. But the notion of Europe’s image of its ideal self, as it took shape in the thought of the Enlightenment, and that of ‘the East’ as Europe’s other, lesser self might still be of some relevance.

So where do we stand today?

**Economics: East-West, North-South**

Last summer I spent a week in the Southern Carpathians, on the idyllic shores of Lake Brădişor. That it is now possible to conduct an international summer school right in the middle of what once was Ceauşescu’s Romania seems to offer perfect proof that the old divisions of the Cold War have long since been happily overcome. The nearby city of Sibiu has been beautifully renovated and bristles with tourists who marvel at the city’s medieval architecture and its multi-ethnic heritage. Its bookstores offer a broad range of Romanian, Transylvanian and international literature. Kundera’s novels might not be in stock but can be procured within a day or two. In Sibiu, his realm of culture is alive and well.

And yet easy accessibility has a flipside. Outside Sibiu, prospects are gloomy. The rapidly ageing population keeps its villages neat and tidy but young people seek their fortune elsewhere. Romania loses 0.5 percent of its population year on year to net emigration. Only Bulgaria, Croatia and Lithuania fare worse in this regard. Statistical estimates predict population losses of more than 15 percent over the next two decades. [2] The effects are dramatic and visible even to an incidental tourist, since cooks and waiters are lacking. They leave for better paid jobs in the Swiss or Bavarian Alps.

These population losses are an effect of the persistent economic divide which still runs right through Europe and will continue to do so for decades to come. Suffice it to say that in 2017, despite substantial improvements compared to previous years, per capita expenditure in Germany still exceeded that of neighbouring Poland by 77 percent. [3] No wonder western Europe exerts an enormous pull on Central Europe’s labour market. Polish nurses and Romanian doctors keep Germany’s healthcare system and its capacity to care for the elderly from collapse, while Central European countries rely on staff from poorer countries further to the East. Market reforms might have brought prosperity to some shining cities and EU subventions substantially improved regional infrastructure in the remotest corners of member states. But they have not been able to bridge Europe’s economic divide. Central Europe appears to be locked into something of a peripheral situation. There is little consolation in the fact that during recent years, another equally strong economic divide between North and South has become prominent. Slovakia, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States allied with Germany attempt to impose austerity on Greece, Italy and Spain. Few western observers seem to notice. The impact on Europe’s mental map has also remained marginal.
Once upon a time, socialism had promised to break away from market constraints, not just in order to confront the industrial societies of the West on an equal footing, but to offer an alternative vision of society. This is a tale from times gone by. But at the time it instilled believers with pride. Such pride had already been deeply injured before communism fell in 1989. Kundera’s decision to overlook the deplorable state of the economy in Hungary and Poland, and to emphasize culture instead, bears the mark of such injured self-esteem. Historian Iván T. Berend, once a believer himself, bluntly described socialism’s outcome as a ‘detour from the periphery to the periphery’. [4] Against this background, the cash-flow in subsidies from Brussels is perceived as just barely righting a wrong inflicted by history.

For many, these subsidies provide a response to a sense of moral entitlement without imposing any political obligations. When in May 2018 the European Commission proposed lower subsidies for Central European countries in favour of the more needy South, it was well advised to justify doing so on the basis of Poland’s and Hungary’s recent economic successes rather than linking the measure to the migration issue. [5] Linking subsidies to political compliance is certainly not a good strategy to overcome European divisions. But the fundamental problem remains: the longer Central Europe lags behind the West, the more this imbalance fosters deeply ingrained notions of moral superiority in the West and of inferiority in the East. Adding North and South to the equation does not alter the outcome substantially. An old divide has become more visible and more painful. Economy inevitably translates into psychology.

**Protest and political cleavages**

December 2018 saw remarkable street demonstrations in Budapest. Answering calls both by the liberal opposition and the radical Right, participants assembled to give voice to two apparently unrelated issues. On the social side, they protested against new legislation allowing employers to push for additional overtime and which the public labelled a ‘slave law’. On the political side, demonstrators challenged the introduction of new administrative courts. They feared that establishing a separate judiciary with newly appointed judges for charges of electoral fraud and corruption would further undermine the fragile independence of the judiciary in Hungary and move the country further in the direction of authoritarian rule. [6] Riot police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. The TV coverage was reminiscent of the violent clashes between yellow vests and the police that had rocked France the previous week and caused property damage estimated to cost several million euros.

The demonstrations in both Paris and Hungary share aspects of social protest against government legislation that is perceived to sacrifice social security on the altars of global capitalism. There is also a common and deep mistrust of political elites which are perceived to be detached from ‘the people’, though the protests differed in their stance towards democratic institutions. Demonstrators in Budapest sought to preserve the remnants of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Demonstrators in Paris, on the contrary, turned their back on these out of a sense of disappointment that has grown over an extended period.

During recent years Central Europe has seen a series of mass demonstrations against the manipulation of superficially democratic institutions by corrupt elites. In June 2013,
thousands were out on the streets of Sofia to protest the hasty appointment of a media tycoon with suspected mafia connections as new head of the National Security Agency. During the ‘Bosnian Spring’ of 2014, a desperate protest against ethnocracy and the institutional and economic constraints of the Dayton agreement turned violent. Demonstrators set fire to the presidential building in Sarajevo and involuntarily destroyed large parts of the State Archives located in the same building. Beginning in 2015, Poles protested against their newly elected government when it set out on its crusade against the independence of the judiciary. In Bratislava, protests in response to the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak swept away the entire government in March 2018. Romania has seen a whole series of protests against government corruption, starting with public demonstrations after a disastrous nightclub fire in late 2015 and peaking with a police crackdown on mass demonstrations on Bucharest’s university square last August. The most recent mass protest against the corruption of outwardly democratic institutions could be observed in Belgrade.

These protests testify to deep political cleavages throughout Central Europe. The cleavages tend to overlap with a rural-urban divide which runs across the entire continent. Populism on the Left and Right has scored electoral victories in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania of a similar magnitude to those in Italy, Austria and the Brexit referendum. Michel Houellebecq’s recent praise for Donald Trump from a French perspective resonates to some extent with recurrent explanations of the political situation in Poland or Hungary. [7] But it is only in Central Europe that a strong urban minority is repeatedly out on the streets in defence of liberal democracy and its institutions. Demonstrators in Warsaw regularly carry EU flags, which they associate with the rule of law. It is hard to imagine such demonstrations, say, in Germany or in Greece. Maybe this is because Central Europeans have experienced communism. They well remember the struggle against communist rule, and they know what is at stake. Some of the protests show generational traits. The erstwhile students of 1989 are now out on the streets again to defend what they achieved three decades ago.

There are several ways of reading the current political situation in Central Europe and beyond. It may be that we are currently witnessing just another new round in an old struggle that is neither for or against Europe but between two different interpretations of Europe: the vision of ‘creating an ever closer union of the peoples of Europe’, as codified in the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, and a Europe of nation states. [8] Could it be that only a united Europe is able to weather the storms of globalization and defend national sovereignty; or does Europe itself undermine these noble goals? Should migrants and refugees be fended off at national borders; or at the borders of the Schengen area? These are just a couple of the most controversial issues raised.

Another way to read the current political situation would be to refer back to Milan Kundera’s essay: now, as in 1983, Central Europe’s rulers might be seen as turning politically once again to the East. Strongmen such as Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczyński find much to admire in an illiberal, guided democracy based on the Russian model, and Orbán openly courts Vladimir Putin. However, this is now a matter of choice and not of coercion. And these strongmen now draw upon support from France’s Marine Le Pen, Italy’s Matteo Salvini and, at least up until recently, Austria’s Heinz-Christian Strache. Thus Europe could be seen as once more forgetting its supreme values and cultural essence. Kundera’s gloomy diagnosis that Europe, i.e. the West, had lost
confidence in itself does now indeed seem to have come true. As if history were to repeat itself, a handful of unwavering defenders in Central Europe are standing up for what they claim to be Europe’s true essence.

**Memory politics**

Milan Kundera defines Central Europe as ‘an uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany [...] But what is a small nation? The small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it.’ Historical memory plays a crucial role in Kundera’s thinking, though this quote is his only, albeit indirect, mention of the Second World War. It also incorporates the argument of the Jewish nation as the paradigmatic small nation. For Kundera, Jews had been ‘the intellectual cement’ of Central Europe, ‘a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity’. He wrote these sentences in the past tense. He knew that this essence had been irretrievably lost. Did Central Europe not ‘lose its soul after Auschwitz, which swept the Jewish nation off its map? And after having been torn away from Europe in 1945, does Central Europe still exist?’ And yet, according to this line of argument, it was the Russians who had launched the attack on Central Europe’s civilization, not Nazi Germany.

Nowadays, few would subscribe to this reading of history, either in central or in western Europe. Meanwhile, the Second World War has returned to the centre of Central European memory. With it came the challenge of addressing the Holocaust. The most ambitious and far-reaching response opened in early 2017 in the form of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. It offered a perspective on the war which has the capacity to bring together diverse national experiences into a common European narrative. The museum achieved this by shifting away from military theatres to the civilian experience, and highlighting terror and resistance as the distinguishing features of the Second World War. The founding director Paweł Machcewicz and his team scored a great success in opening the museum in the face of the government’s persistent attempts to thwart their efforts. [9]

Public interest surpassed all expectations – within 20 months of opening, the museum had welcomed one million visitors.[17] [10] In the interim, Poland’s current minister of culture and national heritage Piotr Gliński has left a lasting mark on the debate too, thus overshadowing the fresh interpretation of the war with a struggle over the extent to which national government can enforce its view of the nation’s history. [11]

Memory politics divide Europe to an extent which Kundera could have barely imagined. At the time, the Soviet claim to have liberated Central Europe from Nazi occupation was not subject to intense debate since it was recognized as being instrumental to upholding the empire and communist rule. But once communism had fallen, societies in Central Europe were far from adopting Western perspectives on the war and conveying a narrative to which the Holocaust was central as both an unparalleled crime and Europe’s foundational experience, the memorialization of which was and remains a universal moral obligation. [12] Once liberated from Soviet rule, Central Europeans instead called on the West to acknowledge their own experience of dual totalitarian occupation and dual victimhood. The European Parliament has answered this call and made 23 August, the
date on which the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was concluded, European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. But attempts to equate the memory of communist oppression with the Holocaust, as seen in Sighet, Vilnius, Riga or Budapest, have been met with severe criticism.

Even more divisive is the issue of complicity in the Holocaust, particularly in Poland and Hungary. Since the current Polish government came to power in December 2015, it has repeatedly called into question the findings that local Poles had murdered Jews in Jedwabne, northeast Poland, on their own initiative. As a counter-narrative to Jedwabne, the Museum of the Ulma Family in Markowa at the other end of the country has given disproportionate attention to commemorating a Polish family who tried to save its Jewish neighbours and paid with their lives for the attempt. When Poland passed a law early in 2018 that was understood to criminalize independent research on such matters, it prompted international protest on a par with that seen in response to the constraints placed on the independence of the judiciary. Hungarian memory politics are equally rooted in the urge to deny any complicity in the deportation of Jews. Such debates also run high in Lithuania.

The memory of the Second World War divides Central Europe and the West to the same degree as it divides them from Russia. Russian celebrations of Victory Day have repeatedly alienated political leaders in the West and particularly in the Baltic states. Conflicting narratives of the Second World War inform Russian propaganda in the war currently being waged against Ukraine. And there is strong reason to believe that Russia’s geopolitical stance is shaped as much by the fear of being encircled by NATO, as it is by injured imperial pride and the feeling that, in a moment of weakness, the country was denied the fruits of its hard win in a war aimed at its annihilation.

**Challenging Europe to rethink its values**

As we reach the end of the current decade, the divide between Europe and Russia, or more precisely Vladimir Putin’s Russia, is arguably the deepest political and cultural divide on the continent, despite the illiberal inclinations among some European politicians. This divide is clear cut and far easier to recognize than old and new divides between Central Europe and the West. It is even more deeply rooted in diverging memories of the Second World War and also far more threatening in geopolitical terms. It is the divide which Kundera had wanted to draw attention to as the most fundamental and inalterable.

Revisiting the divides of 1983, just as much as reflecting on current ones in the light of Kundera’s observations, challenges Europe to address and rethink its values. These, of course, are as controversial as the idea of Europe itself and far from being exclusively European. Their essence lies in the very idea of controversy. Central Europe has bestowed upon us an intellectual legacy of dissidence, which reaches far beyond its origins in the struggle against communist dictatorship. When we face the challenges of climate change, global migration and digitalization, there is not much to rely on which would be more appealing than the ‘authority of the thinking, doubting individual, and […] an artistic creation that expressed its uniqueness’.  

**Footnotes**

2. Eurostat: *Population change* – crude rates of total change, natural change and net migration plus adjustment. Eurostat: *Population on 1 January* by age, sex and type of projection.

3. Eurostat: *Purchasing power parities, price level indices and real expenditures for ESA 2010 aggregates*; real expenditure per capita.


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