History and politics between Left and Right, East and West

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Opposition to last year's Prague Declaration on "European Conscience and Totalitarianism" reveals a change of attitude on the part of western Europe towards the East, writes Violeta Davoliute. Western fears about an upsurge of ultra-nationalism in eastern Europe suggests the era of democratic idealism has come to an end.

A recent conference on the “Crimes of Communism” in Prague got off to an awkward start when Pavel Zacek, the chief organizer of the event and Director of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (USTR), had his mandate terminated just days before the opening session.

By coincidence, it seems, another person lost his job while attending the conference. Marius Oprea was not only fired as President of the Romanian Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes (IICC), but his Institute was also deprived of its investigatory powers.

Oprea claims he was fired because he is a member of the oppositional National Liberal Party, though he denies that his political interests affected his work. Zacek’s supporters say that his dismissal was political too, reflecting the shift of power from the centre-right Civic Democrats the centre-left Social Democrats.

In any case, over sixty conference participants rallied in support of their fallen comrades to sign a petition that expressed “grave concern” about what were seen as attempts “to weaken institutions dedicated to the investigation and exposure of crimes of communism”. [1]

In all probability, however, there is nothing to connect the fate of these two men except that both held highly political jobs in their respective countries. Each should have expected sooner or later to be dismissed on political grounds as an occupational hazard.

After all, the work of the USTR, the IICC, and a handful of similar institutes in the other former communist states of central and eastern Europe is inescapably political.
Investigation into crimes committed by the old regime can be easily used as a political weapon by those currently in office (and has been used fairly often). Although it does not have to be this way, the potential for abuse is what makes the job precariously political. [2]

And now, with the increasing integration of national political parties at the EU level, a new dimension to the politicization of the past has emerged. The familiar contest between Left and Right in a given country over the meaning and significance of its past has now become transnational. A second axis of contention, between East and West, has come to the fore, a result of the divergent historical experiences of EU member states on either side of the Iron Curtain during and after World War II.

Politicking the past

The controversy that flared last autumn in the UK media over Polish politician Michal Kaminski is a good example of the problems that arise when differences between East and West get blown out of proportion in the heat of the political battle between Left and Right.

Following the June 2009 elections to the European Parliament, Conservative MEPs from Britain got together with the Czech Civic Democrats and the Polish Law and Justice Party (along with individual MEPs from a handful of other national parties) to form the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR).

The origins of the ECR go back to 2005, when David Cameron was elected leader of the British Conservatives. At the time, he promised to pull the Tories out of the EPP and form a new political group more in tune with the Euroscepticism of his supporters. But when it came time to ditch the EPP, several Tory MEPs opposed the move, feeling they would lose influence by dropping out of the largest political group in the European Parliament.

But the real sensation was caused when the British Labourites and the leftist media trained their sights on Michal Kaminski, the chairman of the newly formed group, from the Polish Law and Justice Party, and the first MEP from Eastern Europe to lead one of the political groups in the EP.

Over the course of several weeks in the fall of 2009, the progressive UK public was scandalized by reports that Tory MEPs were led in Brussels by an individual who had presented an award to Augusto Pinochet, referred to homosexuals as “fags” (a rough translation of the Polish pedal), and made comments suggesting that Poles should apologize for the WWII massacre of Jews in the town of Jedwabne only once Jews apologize for atrocities committed by the Soviet Army.

The left-leaning Guardian led the charge, the story was given legs by the BBC, and even the Economist joined the fray, calling the ECR a “shoddy, shaming alliance”. [3] Right-leaning papers like the Daily Telegraph mounted a valiant defence, citing the Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, who denied that Kaminski is an anti-Semite. The Jewish Chronicle went further, calling Kaminski a friend of Israel, saying: “It is not Kaminski who is odious; it is those using anti-Semitism as a tool for their own political ends who deserve contempt.” [4]
But whatever kind words may have been said about Kaminski, the image of eastern Europe got a black eye, with stereotypes and clichés of eastern Europeans used to support the partisan critique of an individual politician. And it was not just Kaminski. Roberts Zile, leader of the Latvian Fatherland and Freedom Party, was fingered as another “odious ally” of the Tories because he attends events commemorating veterans who served in a Latvian SS division. [5]

Indeed, some commentators were explicit in their view that the “Kaminski problem” affected not only a few bad apples, but rather spoiled to the entire crop of the new accession states. Jonathan Freedland, a Guardian columnist and regular contributor to the New York Times and BBC Radio 4’s series on contemporary history, drew this conclusion:

> It’s become bad form to mention it, because we are meant to be friendly towards the newest members of the European Union. But the truth is that several of these ‘emerging democracies’ have reverted to a brand of ultra-nationalistic politics that would repel most voters in western Europe. It exists in Poland and Latvia, but also Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Romania and beyond. During the long decades of the Soviet era this chauvinistic, often racially supremacist politics was buried; but in 1989 it was exhumed, shook off the dirt, and breathed once more. [6]

The Economist made a similar argument. Pointing to the “war, genocide, famine, invasion, fascism, communism, economic turmoil and corruption” that plagued those territories during the twentieth century, the authoritative weekly concluded: “The politics and parties that emerged have been warped and confused by that awful past.”

Leaving the substance of this line argument aside, it is striking to consider how much the attitude it reflects – of the West towards the East – has changed over the past twenty years. Because there is nothing new about the question of anti-Semitism in Poland, or the controversy over national armed formations under Nazi occupation that fought against the Soviets. This was all well-known in 1989.

It seems instead that the time when the East was seen through the rose-tinted spectacles of democratic idealism has come to an end, along with the patronizing attitude towards the intellectuality of eastern European politicians, which hung so well in their bulky, drab sits. Now, the distinction between the between the two halves of Europe is seen as hard-wired historically and looking to get worse. The kid gloves are off.

Today, when politicians from the East are dressed in flashy Armani suits and sporting expensive watches; when they are not somewhere “out there” behind Iron Curtain, but sitting in the same club; and when, moreover, they are not just in the club but the chairman of the club, there is suddenly a lot less enthusiasm, and a lot more caution, about keeping their company.

**Revisiting the past**

And what about the substance of the issue? What about the significant differences of historical experience alluded to above? What about their effect on European politics and
Several of the articles I have cited refer to efforts spearheaded by a politicians from the eastern EU states to secure greater recognition of the distinct history of their half of Europe during WWII and its aftermath. The proposal to make 23 August, the day of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, an official European day to commemorate the victims of totalitarian regimes, is perhaps the most iconic and hotly debated aspect of their proposals.

The idea was introduced in 2008 in the “Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism”, which calls on Europeans to recognize the crimes of the former communist regimes as deserving of the same kind of condemnation and commemoration as the crimes committed by the Nazis. The motivation for such a declaration was to broaden the historical perspective of Europeans to include the historical experiences and perspectives of the new EU member states.

The idea gained support and was debated at the European Parliament. The text underwent a number of changes, and was ultimately approved by a large majority in the spring of 2009 as a resolution of the European Parliament entitled, “On European Conscience and Totalitarianism”.

The replacement of the word “communism” with “totalitarianism” in the title represents a sort of compromise. For the Left in western Europe, communism as a whole should clearly not to be equated with the worst crimes of Stalinism. At the same time, the name change also captured the fact that eastern European countries suffered terribly under Nazi occupation too. But for some, the inclusion of both Nazi and Soviet crimes under the banner of totalitarianism implies an unacceptable comparison and moral equivalence.

Associates of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, an organization devoted to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice, have been most active in criticizing the Prague Declaration. For them, the hidden agenda of the movement is to obfuscate the responsibility of those who collaborated with the Nazis by posing as the victims of communism.

For example, Efraim Zurof, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, calls the EU resolution a “Red-Brown” manifesto and says the ideas it represents are insidious: “If communism equals fascism,” he said, “then communism equals genocide. This would mean that Jews also were involved in genocide because among Jews there were many communists.” [7]

Going into more detail, Rabbi Abraham Cooper from the Wiesenthal centre asks how such a joint commemoration would take place: “A moment of silence for Jewish citizens butchered by the Nazis and their local collaborators, followed by a moment of silence for these victimizers, later turned into ‘victims of Communism?’”

In response to this line of criticism, the drafters of the EU resolution added an important clause that explicitly asserts the uniqueness of the Holocaust. [8] Nevertheless, the controversy continues. In the days leading to 27 January 2010, when European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek was to make a speech for International Holocaust Remembrance Day at Auschwitz, several Holocaust researchers criticized Buzek for having supported the EU resolution. [9]
East-West reconciliation and the historical divide

As is well known, discussions about the history of the twentieth century (especially WWII) have been raging in Europe for two at least two decades, that is, since 1989. When the euphoria ended, it turned out that Europeans on each side of the Iron Curtain saw the history of this period, among other things, in a strikingly different way.

By 1989, West Europeans had already formed a generally accepted narrative on WWII and its significance, including the difficult issue of collaboration. Nonetheless, some kind of a consensus was reached: WWII brought about terrible suffering and the incomparable tragedy of the Holocaust; 1945 marked the victory of good over evil and the beginning of a new era in the continent. Victory Day (be it May 8 or 9) could be celebrated by all Europeans both West and East. Or so it seemed at the time.

But when, after 1989, the “new Europeans” stepped out from behind the Iron Curtain, their stories about the war after the war – the secret pact over the division of Europe, the brutalities of Soviet totalitarianism – did not fit into the relatively simple framework of WWII and victory over Nazism.

Moreover, the multiple occupations of eastern Europe, the redrawing of borders, collaboration with various regimes, and forced resettlements left such a complex heritage of historical traumas, loyalties and interests, that it became impossible to squeeze the past into the framework of just one perspective.

It has been especially difficult for western Europeans to understand or appreciate the perspective of their eastern counterparts, because they know relatively little of the basic history of the era. In other words, even as the political divide in Europe was healed, a historical divide, and a divide of historical consciousness, remained.

Will the initiative represented by the Prague Declaration help to forge a common historical memory and unite Europeans both from East and West? Or will the disputes it has inflamed produce the opposite; namely, the disintegration of the project to establish a common European consciousness? Currently there is no clear answer to this question.

If 23 August were to gain official status as a day of commemoration for the victims of all authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, it would probably provoke a great deal of controversy. But controversy is not always bad, and it may be the only way to get all Europeans to take a closer look at the history of their neighbours.

So long as the discussion between East and West is not overwhelmed by the political contest between Left and Right, Europeans may yet come to see each other directly: with no Iron Curtains, and no rose-tinted spectacles obscuring the view.

Footnotes


2. See: Rabbi Abraham Cooper, "Dropping international Holocaust Memorial Day Would


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