Middle Europe: On the way home

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Yaroslav Shimov analyses the situation of the "Middle Europe" countries during the Habsburg monarchy and today, at the onset of their integration into the European Union. How can this future be envisaged and what can be learned from the past? Shimov argues that these countries must retain their unique identities in a united Europe.

1

In a café in Prague’s central train station, a portrait is drawn directly on the wall: an elderly man with tired eyes set in a web of wrinkles, whose total baldness is compensated by dense side-whiskers. Franz Joseph I, by God’s grace Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of Hungary, King of the Czechs, of Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia and Illyria, Grand Duke of Tuscany and Cracow, Grand Prince of of Transylvania, Margrave of Moravia etc etc etc… Another portrait of whom, in Jaroslav Hasek’s famous and very angry parody on the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, was defiled by flies, which cost the portrait’s owner, the innkeeper Palivec, ten years of prison.

Unlike Hasek’s emperor, the one in the train station is not being attacked by flies; he has a tired – no wonder, the old man is 170! – but confident look: see, my dear friends, I have won in the end! He is right: in recent years, in the Czech Republic, in Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia and other countries that used to belong to the Habsburg empire, there has been a growth of interest in the era when the monarch with the grey side-whiskers was still reigning over his extensive realm from the chambers of the Viennese palace of Schönbrunn. These are not just sentimental recollections of a common past, but also attempts to grope for a road into the future, a sign that the peoples of Central Europe have regained mastery over themselves. , “with joint forces”, Franz Joseph’s motto, turns out not to have grown obsolete over the years. After decades of strife, war, dictatorship and foreign occupation, Central Europe is coming home.

However, the author of these lines prefers the name of “Middle Europe”. “Central” means something that everything else turns around. The navel of the earth, the centre of the universe. In short, that which the conglomerate of small, mostly Slavonic peoples who live between the Danube, the Oder and the Bug has never been. The “middle”, on the other hand, is simply that which is in-between. Which is precisely how these countries are
placed in relation to the other parts of Europe: the prospering, but somewhat arrogant West, and the crisis-ridden post-Soviet East, which still inspires vague fears among its neighbours.

Middle Europe is in-between in more than just a geographic sense. Life standards, traditions, ways of thinking – in these countries, despite their mutual dissimilarities, everything is somehow intermediate, mixed, not completely Western, but evidently not like “ours” either. Like the West in Soviet cinema: the signs are in Latin characters, there are Gothic spires in the background, there are narrow streets which a manly and pensive Vyacheslav Tikhonov walks down [1] – but it’s instantly clear that these splendours were filmed in the Baltics, or at best in Prague or Dresden.

But no, probably I’m wrong. Unlike Soviet cinema, Middle Europe isn’t fake at all. It is simply intermediate or, as its scion and connoisseur Milan Kundera has written, “a small arch-European Europe, a model of Europe built according to the principle of ‘a maximum of diversity in a minimum of living space’”. And, he adds as though especially for Russian readers, to dot all the i’s, “How could Middle Europe not have been terrified when it crashed with Russia, which believes in the opposite principle, ‘a minimum of diversity in a maximum of living space’?”

This, I think, and not just the obvious faults of the Soviet communism that was inculcated in them in the 1940s, is why the peoples of Middle Europe never became “ours”, and why the forced friendship under the red banners never produced a real cultural and civilisational closeness. Quite simply, there can be no greater difference than that between the snowstorms sweeping across the Russian steppe, and the sparse white flakes quietly falling on the crooked streets of Cracow, Prague or Buda on a Christmas evening. Even though both are made of snow.

2

Great empires usually emerge as a result of great military victories. Not so the state of the Habsburgs: in the form in which it eventually entered history – as a multilingual, but fairly comfortable community of Middle European peoples, this empire appeared mainly due to defeats. In the mid-17th century, the Habsburgs lost the Thirty Years’ War and had to resign themselves to an abrupt loss of influence in Germany. Two hundred years later, the then youthful Franz Joseph unsuccessfully fought Napoleon III and his Italian allies, and had to give up his fairly extensive lands in the North of Italy. Finally, in 1866, Bismarck’s Prussia, full of a leaden force, beat the Austrians near the Czech village of Sadová, making the Habsburgs realise at last that the roads of northward and westward expansion were closed to them. A year later, Franz Joseph yielded to the Hungarian politicians who were threatening revolution, and re-organised his empire, turning the centralised state into a federation consisting of two parts, each of which was virtually independent in its domestic policy. Thus Austro-Hungary was born: a unique multinational state, which many in Middle Europe (with obvious overstatement) call the precursor of today’s European Union.

The only Middle European people who mostly remained outside the framework of this state were the Poles. As early as the 18th century, they had, as we would say today, an alternative project. The , a huge kingdom spread out from Prussia to Smolensk, inhabited
by people of diverse origins, languages, and religions, so much that one of the representatives of the Polish Enlightenment ironically remarked: “Polonia est nova Babilonia”, Poland is the new Babylon. There was another saying in those days: “The foundation of Poland is disorder.”

This disorder, where the veto of a single member of the szlachta could topple any law in the sejm, where royal power was the plaything of aristocratic clans, and Orthodox subjects of the Polish Crown were considered second-rate people, is what brought down the Rzeczpospolita. Three black eagles pecked the white one to death: in three rounds, Austria, Prussia and Russia divided up their restless neighbour’s territory among themselves. For over 120 years, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. When, in 1918, it was resurrected, it was already something completely different: a national state for the Poles rather than a multilingual Babylon.

After the carve-up of the Rzeczpospolita, the Habsburg state remained the only Middle European empire. It gave its peoples what none of them would have obtained on its own: a sense of security, of salutary unity-in-diversity of languages, cultures and religions and, finally, of belonging to a great power which, though it was beaten more than once, remained an important factor in European politics until the end. Later on the nationalists and communists would be united in declaring that the Habsburg Empire was a “prisonhouse of peoples” (Lenin, as we remember, used to say the same thing of the Romanov Empire; how stereotypical was the thinking of the overthrowers of old orders across Europe!). In fact, Austro-Hungary was more of an incubator for the cultures, and along with them the national consciousness, of the Czechs and Slovaks, the Croats and Slovenes, the Serbs and Romanians… Many pioneers of national rebirth understood and valued this. Thus, the 19th century Czech historian and politician Frantisek Palacks wrote: “If the Habsburgs didn’t already rule us, they should be put on the throne.” Half a century later, however, most of the leaders of national liberation movements would sound a very different note.

Of course, the state presided over by the stern old man with the side-whiskers wasn’t ideal. Austro-Hungary didn’t manage to become the “United States of Middle Europe”, melting the cultures of its peoples into one. The concept of “Austrian” meant “a loyal subject of the Habsburgs”, no more. But the model of statehood chosen in 1867 wasn’t acceptable to all loyal subjects. Among the twenty or so nations living under the sceptre of the ancient dynasty, only two were privileged: the Germans and the Hungarians. Not only were they culturally the most advanced, but they both had experience of statehood, which, in the Habsburgs’ eyes, made them a natural support for the throne. To the detriment of the Slavic majority of the empire’s population, which, as it developed economically and culturally, became a serious political force, desperately opposed to Germanisation in the Western part of Austro-Hungary, and to Magyarisation in its East.

The emperor’s and his dynasty’s authority held back the evil spirits of nationalism for a while, but in the summer of 1914, after the killing of the archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, the Habsburgs made a step towards doom by entering the ill-fated war against Serbia and Russia. By the way, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne had foreseen this. Two years before his death, Franz Ferdinand, a nervous and arrogant person not loved by anyone except his own family, but intelligent and perspicacious, had written: “War against Russia would be the end for us... Must the Austrian emperor and the Russian tsar
really dethrone each other and open the gates to revolution?“ And so it happened. When, on a November evening in 1916, the 86 year old Franz Joseph died in Schönbrunn, it was too late to save the empire.

Under conditions of peace, the Habsburgs could probably have explained to their peoples that living together in the framework of a united state was necessary and even inevitable (a state, by the way, which wasn’t despotic at all: in the Western part of the empire there was universal suffrage, and the speeches held in parliament were sometimes such that even in the current democratic republics, the authorities wouldn’t exactly pat one’s head for them). But in the heat of the war it wasn’t easy to convince people that the death of tens of thousands soldiers on four fronts, the famine and price rises in the towns and the universal poverty in the villages all had some sort of higher justification. The emperor himself, it seems, no longer believed in a happy ending. “And then there will be revolution…”, Franz Joseph is reported by a member of his retinue to have muttered to himself, thinking that no-one could hear him. They did – much more clearly than the old monarch thought.

His successor Karl, the last Habsburg emperor, was young and inexperienced, while Austro-Hungary itself was at the time too dependent on its terrible friend, the Kaiser’s Germany. The agony continued for another two years, until November 1918, when the war was lost and infuriated crowds rushed to tear down the imperial eagles in Vienna and Prague, Budapest and Zagreb. The Habsburg project of a united Middle Europe collapsed. Could it have survived, was it viable? The historians continue to argue about this. Be that as it may, in the autumn of 1918 the recent subjects of Franz Joseph entered a new era, one of national isolation and the unheard-of catastrophes that this led to.

Great empires built across centuries have a surprising peculiarity: they collapse in one day, and hardly anyone weeps for them. For a while.

3

After the Habsburgs, Austria most of all resembled Professor Dowell’s head [2], stripped of a body and living on either by sheer habit or due to the malicious system of geopolitical contrivances that the victorious Entente devised for Middle Europe. Vienna, a two million-strong sumptuous imperial city, became the capital of a tiny provincial republic. Austria floated in space and time. Between the defeated and humiliated, but not dismembered German colossus and the Middle European mosaic that had fallen to pieces. Between an imperial past swiftly turning into a sugary fairytale about the “good old times”, the uncomfortable present and a hazy future.

“When I try to find a fitting definition for the era that preceded the First World War, the era I grew up in”, Stefan Zweig yearned for the past, “it seems to me that it would be most exact to say that it was a golden age of hope. Everything in our thousand year old Austrian monarchy, it seemed, was calculated for eternity, and the state was the highest guarantor of this continuity.” It was as a result of this search for security and continuity that Austria, in 1938, threw itself at the feet of its creature, the brilliant scoundrel – a visionary, a psychopath, a gambler? The word Anschluss, which sounds both like a slap in the face and like the click of a rifle, was the final word in the history of old Austria which, just like nine centuries ago, became a mere Ostmark, an “Eastern province”, an outpost
of the German Reich.

The same year that Hitler rode through the streets of his despised cosmopolitan Vienna in an open-top car, drawing a line under the Habsburgs’ heritage (two of them, sons of the archduke Franz Ferdinand, ended up in Dachau, where SS men harnessed them to a barrel of excrements), saw the collapse of another state that had appeared out of the monarchy’s debris: Czechoslovakia, Middle Europe’s only democracy in an era when democracy looked a silly and pathetic vestige of the past.

The brainchild of the Prague intellectual, Professor Masaryk, one of the gravediggers of the Habsburg Empire and the first Czechoslovak president, died not only because of the Western powers’ Munich treason, when it was handed over to Hitler without much complaint, but also for the same reason as Austria: its incapacity to deal with the demons of nationalism. The Sudeten Germans who lived in the Czech-German border area greeted the Wehrmacht as liberators, while many Slovaks applauded the Munich agreements, thinking that it would free them from Prague’s hateful brotherly embrace. The Poles and Hungarians couldn’t resist kicking their dying neighbour, tearing away border areas they had been claiming for a long time. Berlin was sincerely happy to see how easily the ancient principle of “divide and rule” could be applied in Middle Europe. The Habsburgs were restlessly turning in their Viennese graves.

By that time, the former empire’s second capital, Budapest, had taken over all other European cities in numbers of suicides. The mortally sad song “Gloomy Sunday”, by composer Rezso Seress, became the unofficial anthem of 1930s Hungary. The country, that had been gnawed round by the peace treaty of 1918 (which led to 3 million Hungarians finding themselves abroad), just like Austria did not manage to find a new raison d’ètre. It was forced to embark on a hopeless quest for the old one: the Hungarian regent, the old admiral Horthy, negotiated a pact with Hitler, and his country recovered the lost territories. But only for a few years, until the summer of 1945, when the Germans deposed Horthy, who was contemplating surrender to the Western allies; the Magyar Fascists, together with the SS, massacred tens of thousands of local Jews; and the Red Army utterly destroyed not only the centre of Budapest, but also the dream of a Great Hungary.

And that was just the beginning. In February 1945, a grandiose bargaining began in Yalta: the “big three” divided up Middle and Eastern Europe: the West gave Stalin Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary almost without struggle – what struggle could there have been when Soviet troops had already either occupied these countries, or were in the process of beating the last Germans still desperately resisting on their territories? In Yugoslavia, that Balkan mini-empire created in 1918 by the Serb Karadjordjevic dynasty, there was now a new ruler, the Communist marshal Tito. Greece Stalin ceded to the Western allies. Poland was hardest to reach a deal on, but here, too, the Kremlin highlander got the better of Churchill and Roosevelt.

It would be interesting, although completely idle, to think about what would have happened if the united Danube state had survived the First World War. Without the Habsburgs, perhaps, as a federative or confederated republic, a kind of a big Switzerland, but conserving that salutary unity without which the peoples of Middle Europe became prey to their large and aggressive neighbours. It is quite probable that
the Second World War would simply not have taken place then, or that its course would
have been completely different. But then history, as we know, leaves no room for
counterfactuals.

The victorious salutes of 1945 faded, and Middle Europe stepped from the Nazi fire into
the flame of Communism. By the end of the 1940s, the “popular democratic” regimes
created in the liberated states under Moscow’s watch were replaced by puppet
democracies under local red leaders. For the 40 years to come, Middle Europe was to live
under Big Brother’s watchful eyes.

The nightmare ended just as abruptly as it had started. But on the road to 1989, when the
Soviet Union, torn by domestic strife, left Middle Europe of its own accord, the Poles and
Hungarians, the Czechs and Slovaks were in for a few more bitter lessons. If every defeat
teaches the defeated a lesson, then these peoples are among the wisest: probably no-one
has lost as often as them. The “Munich complex of 1938” (a term often used by Czech and
Slovak historians) was topped up with the Budapest complex of 1956 and the Prague
complex of 1968, the crushing of the Gdansk revolt in 1970 and the declaration of a state
of emergency in Poland in 1981.

The breakdown of Communism in Middle Europe wasn’t the “spring of the peoples” that
contemporary mythmakers want us to believe in. Every people scrambled out of its
historical impasse on its own, and each in its own way. The Hungarian leader János
Kádár, a wise and saddened person, was tormented throughout his life by what he had
done in 1956, when he had reached for power using the armour of Soviet tanks for a
shield, betraying many of his former friends. To atone for his sins, Kadar invented
“goulash Communism” – a social model which Stalin, had he still been alive, would no
doubt have compared to a radish, for being red on the outside, it was completely white on
the inside, allowing the Hungarians to engage in free enterprise, to read books which in
the USSR or even in neighbouring Czechoslovakia would have guaranteed them a term in
prison, and travel abroad relatively freely – not only Eastwards. Hungary prepared for
freedom for about twenty years, and when Moscow finally gave its OK, the country
slipped from “goulash Communism” to a relatively comfortable post-Communism quite
smoothly, though not without economic difficulties.

Poland, where the readiness to fight for any cause is just as much a part of national
character as enterprise, a prudent attitude to money and anti-Semitism of all kinds, chose
a less peaceful path. The Poles went on strike, kicked up rows, created Solidarnosc
(nominally a trade union, but in essence an anti-Communist movement), triggered the
declaration of martial law and the disappearance of everything except vinegar from
Warsaw’s shops (in the winter of 1981-1982) – but in the end they did squeeze the regime
to death. But then here, as in Hungary, the man on the other side of the barricades, the
red side, was anything but an ordinary politician. In contemporary Poland, paradoxically,
he has been put on trial, rather than having a statue erected in his honour. Wojciech
Jaruzelski, son of a Polish army officer exiled to Siberia and an officer himself, a Catholic
believer but at the same time, strangely enough, a party careerist and Poland’s last
Communist president. The leader who saved the country from civil war in the early
1980s, started a dialogue with the opposition and voluntarily surrendered power, in 1990,
to that hero of rallies, Gdansk electrician and father of many children, Lech Walesa. The latter governed for five years, becoming a kind of a Polish Yeltsin and brilliantly confirming the old wisdom that he who is born to destroy cannot go on to build.

In Czechoslovakia, everything went more smoothly and quietly – not the Polish way, but certainly not the Hungarian way either. The local Communist party, purged by the victorious Stalinists after the Prague Spring, was unable to produce its own Kádárs and Jaruzelskis. The country was ruled by nonentities – until November 1989, when spontaneous action by Prague students and intellectuals swiftly put an end to a system which had long reposed only on the Czechs’ characteristic dislike of conflict and mutiny. The Czechoslovak revolution was called a “velvet” one, and the soft, timid and clumsy man it brought to power, the dissident Václav Havel, turned out to be as awful a politician as he was a good philosopher and playwright. He is the only one from the “mighty bunch” of Middle European anti-Communist leaders from the early 90s who remains in power to this day. Havel is still the pride of the Czech Republic and respected abroad, but many Czechs are glad that their country’s constitution doesn’t give the president wide-ranging authority. Otherwise that quiet, practical and ever sceptical people who like dumplings, beer and ice hockey, could have been subjected to odd social experiments in a Platonic vein, which the Czech president has repeatedly displayed a predilection for. But that is a very different story, just like the Czechs’ and Slovaks’ divorce, three years after the “velvet revolution”, which, unlike the end of the USSR, is not much regretted on either side of the Czech-Slovak border.

Once the euphoria of the first years after the fall of Communism had ceased, Middle Europe once again felt abandoned. Over the seven decades following the collapse of the Habsburg state, it had become accustomed to the fact that its fate was decided somewhere far away, beyond its borders – in Versailles and Berlin, in Munich and Yalta, in Potsdam and Moscow... “Our recent history hasn’t been such as to encourage the formation of a political nation”, the Czech philosopher Václav Belohradsky says about his people. “In our history, politics has always been the job of ‘those strangers’...” This is probably why Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic are so desperately forcing their way into NATO and the EU – like children who had been playing outdoors until nightfall, and suddenly notice that the adults have forgotten about them sitting in front of the fireplace and drinking tea. The doors of NATO were opened to them quite quickly. The European Union, where economic, monetary interests play a greater role than political ones, is a more complicated matter.

Last June, distant Ireland played a dirty trick on the Middle Europeans; in a referendum, the citizens of Ireland vetoed the treaty that was to seal the European Union’s imminent enlargement. The infuriated Polish president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, accused the Irish of “egoism”, but can the people of green meadows, thick fog and black beer really be blamed? It seems they simply feel what the politicians, carried away by their games, have forgotten: as long as an average Pole or Czech earns five times less than his German neighbour, three times less than an Italian, and one-and-a-half times less than an Irishman, one can hardly expect 50-odd million inhabitants of Middle Europe painlessly to grow part of the EU’s organism.

Nevertheless, the direction of Middle Europe’s development seems clear: it’s going West. Is it going to come home in the process? The region’s residents themselves have more
and more doubts about this. The myths about “leaping into capitalism” and “marching into Europe” that were so popular eight years ago have vanished like fog clearing over the Vistula. Rather than an idyllic union of the strong and good, NATO has turned out to be a military block with a rigid structure and an even more rigid policy which has a strong smell of blood and dirt (by the way, of all Middle European countries, Poland was the only one where the bombing of Yugoslavia was met with clear and unanimous support). Brussels’s Eurocrats also turned out not to be Santa Clauses, and their evaluations of Middle European societies are rarely flattering (and just as rarely unbiased).

Middle Europe has not become disappointed with the West. It is simply learning to be more realistic. And to understand that the united Europe which so much has been said and written about does not exist. There is only the geographic space between Gibraltar and Yekaterinburg, torn into several unequal parts, each one of which lives according to its own laws. Sewing these rags into a blanket is a task for a very skilled and patient tailor, who has if not an eternity, then at least a whole historical era to spend on it. Middle Europe is one of these rags, multicoloured, nice to touch and to look at, which has a value of its own, not just as a buffer between the well-ordered West and wild Russia. The dwellers of this Hobbitania, however much they would like to look “100% European”, still have much more in common with each other than with their Western or Eastern neighbours. And they will obviously be able to survive only if they remain themselves, preserving that unassuming cosiness and warmth which one enjoys when slipping from an autumnal drizzle into a Prague, Budapest, or Cracow café, inhaling the smell of Turkish coffee and ordering an icily thick slivovitz.

Then you sit there, smiling and winking at the emperor on the wall. ... You were right, Your Majesty.

Footnotes

1. An actor starring in the cult Soviet series 17 Moments in Spring, a story of a Soviet spy set in Germany and Switzerland. [Translator's note]

2. Title of a science fiction story by Russian writer Alexander Belyaev, where a medical genius finds a way to keep human heads alive and sew them onto new bodies. [Translator's note]

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