

**PERCEPTIONS**  
**JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**December 2001- February 2002 / Vol. - VI Num.4**

**CENTRAL EUROPE: HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVES**

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In the last decade, Central Europe has awakened from a long period of ‘suspended animation’. Until 1989-90, the phrase ‘Central Europe’ could scarcely be heard from any politician. It existed only in the conceptual armamentarium of historians, art historians and literary scholars. The prevailing opinion among politicians, especially in the US, was that the region of the Danube and the Vistula was part of the immense political unit of Eastern Europe that started somewhere at the Brandenburg Gate and ended at Vladivostok. It was identified with the Soviet sphere of influence. Scarcely no distinction was made between the particular sections of the Soviet region, thus blurring the borderlines between Silesia and the Ural region, or between Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, on the one hand and Moscow, on the other. However, those familiar with nineteenth and twentieth century history know that Central Europe is a highly distinctive European region which, because of the balance of forces that emerged at the end of World War II, came under Soviet domination and it only managed to extricate itself as late as 1990-91.

Central Europe is an enormous European region extending historically from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Adriatic, from the Sudetenland to the Carpathian Mountains. Its borders have changed and are still changing. In the Western European and American political lexicon of the last couple of years, it has embraced those states (besides Turkey, Cyprus and Malta) which have association agreements with the European Union, namely, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria. Historians and politicians are debating whether Bulgaria and Romania do, in fact, form part of Central Europe. There are arguments and counter-arguments for both sides of that debate.

Central Europe, as construed in the economic, sociological and cultural senses of that term, does not coincide with political Central Europe. Indeed, the political Central Europe of our own days also features some civilisation boundaries, in the Huntingtonian meaning of the word: between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy in Romania, between Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy in Bulgaria. While, looking at it from a different angle, numerous regions of the EU —Bavaria, Austria, Northern Italy— tend to view themselves, historically and in terms of mental attitude, as Central European; they look upon Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia as their eastern hinterland. And, in the east, where historical Central Europe was severely dented, we are hearing ever-louder calls from the intellectuals of Eastern Galicia, Sub-Carpathia, Northern Bukovina and, indeed, Western Belarus, who are profoundly disappointed at finding themselves excluded from political Central Europe. This is even though, in the past, Lemberg (Lwov, Lviv), Ungvar (Uzhorod), Czernovitz (Cernovci) and Grodno greatly contributed to the cultural and economic boom of Central Europe.

Analysts of the Central European region know very well that, even in our days, the contradictions concerning the Central European legacy manifest themselves in a pronounced fashion in political organisational structures. The Central European Initiative (1993), which grew out of the Quadragonale, set up in 1989 (1990 Pentagonale, later Hexagonale), comprises nearly all the states which are Central European or which would like to be accepted as Central European, but also those which embrace the Central European legacy. Alongside those seven states with EU-Association Agreements (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria) Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Italy and Austria, are members of that loose community of sixteen states, whose main emphasis tends to be on the co-ordination of long-term economic questions.

The Visegrad Co-operation, which includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia among its members, is often referred to as a Central European élite club. It was set up in Visegrad, Hungary in 1991, in the interests of harmonising Hungarian, Polish and, at that time, Czechoslovak views relating to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Structured co-ordination between Budapest, Warsaw and Prague, with varying degrees of intensity, has been going on ever since. It is a source of satisfaction that, following the elections in 1998, Slovakia, too, rejoined this forum of co-ordination and co-operation. The Visegrad Co-operation, however, does not regard itself as an élite club, but rather as a sort of 'Inner Central Europe'; the structural nucleus of the region.

The Central European region is trying to integrate itself into EU structures. Simultaneously, it is endeavouring, like an amoeba, to revitalise old structures regarding its relations with the Baltic region, its north-eastern neighbours and with South Eastern Europe. Poland and Hungary have a special role in making sure that the western border of Ukraine opens to Euro-Atlantic emanations. In addition, Hungary has become a western gate to South Eastern Europe and has undertaken a special role in the realisation of the aims of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe.

Today's politically construed Central Europe is at several points dented from the West and from the East and elongated towards the south east. Besides the shared roots existing in material and intellectual culture—which should be apparent to those who have visited Prague, Budapest, Krakow or Vilnius— what binds the region together is its inhabitants' desire to integrate themselves into Western structures at the earliest possible date. They have bitter historical experiences of Russia's geopolitical weight and of Moscow's long-term political clout. Central Europeans are filled with fear at the prospect of being left in a grey zone or a peculiar no-man's land Europe—Zwischen-Europa— extending between the EU and the CIS, with reminiscences of the period between the two World Wars.

Thanks to the wisdom of American, Canadian and European decision-makers, NATO has opened to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. At present, the EU is engaged in negotiations on full membership with 10 countries of the region: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria. If the EU reaches agreement on its internal reform, some of the candidates could achieve full membership as early as 2003. Because of this, Central Europe looks increasingly like a multi-tier region. Here, a special responsibility is attached to the states that are more advanced economically or in terms of political culture or the stability of democratic structures. It is necessary that they share their experience, thereby also assisting the ones next in line. The will to do just that is very much present in Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, Tallinn and Ljubljana.

In the case of Budapest, this was expressed by the diplomatic gesture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who paid his first Central European visit to Romania in the summer of 1998. There has developed a very good working relationship between the two governments. Time and again, however, there is a renewed upsurge of anti-Hungarian feelings among the populist Romanian political parties, directed against Transylvania's two-million-strong ethnic Hungarian community and against the development of Hungarian-Romanian relations.

There is no doubt that there is some rivalry among the Central European countries for the achievement, at the earliest possible date, of NATO or EU membership. But, besides this, there is common interest in co-operation. Hungary has a strategic interest in making sure that Romania is not excluded from the group of countries likely to win NATO or EU membership because we do not want the Hungarian-Romanian border to be a boundary of division between the two countries. We also have a particular interest in the success of Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic integration. This is a common interest of the three new NATO-members with respect to the fact that without this we would see the emergence of a peculiar void between Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

The identity of interests among the Central European states makes it easier to strengthen co-operation in the region. In recent years, we have seen a number of promising signs to that effect. Probably the most important among these are the structures of civil co-operation set up in the last few years, which seem to be gaining a new and lasting infrastructure.

Central European co-operation has broken out of the era of rhetoric. The growth of trade between its countries indicates that the Central European region is learning to recognise itself. Today, Central Europe is an important market not just for the US, the EU and Japan, but also for the Central European states themselves. The Central European Free Trade Agreement,<sup>1</sup> which permitted the dismantling of internal tariff barriers, has bolstered internal market conditions. Building ties is not hard given that it rests on a human infrastructure going back centuries. The Central European peoples know each other well, with millions speaking each other's languages. Their reflexes of communication are identical, their customs are similar, even their way of thinking and their tastes are similar.

All this partly derives from the fact that in Central Europe the boundaries of the state and the nation do not, for the most part, coincide. The Hungarians living in Slovakia and Slovaks living in Hungary are excellent intermediaries between the Hungarian and the Slovak economies. Hungary has, in this regard, a special position since about 3.3 million ethnic Hungarians live in neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> The human infrastructure of intermediary functions is in place and, it seems, the inhabitants of the region do want to use this opportunity (which is something that statistics bear out).

From 1990-91 onwards, we see, throughout Central Europe, new opportunities opening for the nationalities straddling national boundaries. However, the most important areas for the intensification relations are the border regions. In Communist times, there were few border-crossing points in Central Europe and passage across them was difficult. Even relatives living on either side of a border found it difficult to maintain contacts. The post-1990 changes created the opportunity for free communication across borders. Within the space of a few years, the conditions for maintaining economic contacts were also established. However, a lack of funding for a number of vital infrastructure projects has left the opportunities inherent in that new situation unutilised. There is a

need, across the region, for a greater number of modern border-crossing points. There is a crucial need, too, for the renewal of many road and rail links.

The Hungarian Government attaches particular importance to the task of supporting trans-border co-operation schemes. Fortunately, the basic structures for such co-operation have been developed in recent years. The Alps-Adriatic Co-operation has existed for almost two decades. It involves Austria, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, which, as they share borders, have forged good ties with one another. A new scheme is the Hungarian-Austrian Regional Co-operation, linking Burgenland in Austria and the counties of western Hungary. The Tisza-Maros-Körös Co-operation is designed to serve the development of contacts between the border regions of Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, the current situation in Yugoslavia necessarily limits the scope for this latter project. Under the auspices of the Council of Europe, the Carpathian Euro-region was established in 1993, involving the border countries of Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland.

However, I do not want to convey the impression of Central Europe as an island of perennial peace, where there are no conflicts or fundamental differences of opinion. Indeed these exist. They stem from differing notions of the state and of the nation and from a lack of democratic traditions in certain countries. Moreover, we see, in numerous countries of the region, a long tradition of the concept of a centralised nation-state, which, in comparison with the West European concept, is a peculiar consequence of belated national development. Istvan Bibó described the conditions obtaining between the two World Wars as “the misery of small East European states”.<sup>3</sup> We do not want to see a return to that. The Soviet system —with the exception of Romania— repressed national aspirations almost everywhere. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the collapse of socialism removed the brakes. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia fell apart. The dissolution of Yugoslavia has led to a series of bloody wars.

All the Central European countries have ethnic minorities living in their territories. After 1990, there was an intention in some states to separate the granting of rights to ethnic groups from the process of democratic reforms. This turned out to be an unworkable formula. Ensuring the rights of ethnic groups is a yardstick of democracy. At the level of the political élite, that is, by now, a natural thing across the whole region. However, there are populist politicians, who in their power struggles, adopt a nationalist rhetoric and reactivate the aggressive nationalism of their own ethnic group. That is what we have been witnessing for years in Serbia, which the international community has, until now, tried in vain to restrain.

Thus, instead of raising heated passions, Central European politicians have a duty to promote arguments of reason. Multiculturalism, which has deep roots in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, must be restored to the forefront of public thinking. The opinion-forming groups of the region ought to abandon their attempts to make the interests of their own ethnic groups exclusive. They ought to accept that the nation-state is not an ethnic, but a political category. Concurrently, it must also be acknowledged that a cultural bond also links people living on either side of a border —especially when they belong to the same ethnic group. The ethnic Hungarians of Transylvania and those of Slovakia form a single cultural nation —though not in the political sense— with the Hungarians of Hungary proper. The same applies to the bonds between the Poles of Lithuania and Ukraine and their brethren in Poland and to the Romanians of Bukovina and those living in Romania.

Central Europe is not merely a political concept, but also an economic unit of significance in the global economic structure. It appears that several Central European states, like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Slovenia, are able to register, over the long term, a higher GDP growth rate than the EU, which might gain an enhanced global reputation for the region. The US and EU's growing interest in the region is not just political, but also economic. There is no better guarantee for security and a transcending of traditional conflicts than a rising economy.

From the experiences of the last decade, one can draw the conclusion that the Central European historical conflicts are manageable. The past few years have witnessed favourable changes everywhere —with the painful exception of Yugoslavia. A major factor in the settlement of traditional conflicts has been the universal acceptance of Western political and economic values. The United States and the EU have played a positive role in handling the conflicts and, indeed, in preventing some potential conflicts. However, the most important point is that the Central European political élite have, in recent years, clearly recognised that the co-operation of Central European peoples is a fundamental condition of progress. This perception manifests itself in a forceful fashion in the continuous development of the multilateral and bilateral web of relations of the region. One of the most challenging tasks for the future is to make sure that the ideal of Central European co-operation receives greater public support and that there is no gulf between the élite and society, a state of affairs that is the unfortunate hallmark of some countries.

1 The Central European Free Trade Agreement, established in 1992, comprises the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria.

2 Two thousand in Romania, 700,000 in Slovakia, 350,000 in Yugoslavia, 200,000 in Ukraine, 70,000 in Austria, 20,000 in Croatia and 10,000 in Slovenia.

3 Istvan Bibó (1911-1979), a well-known Hungarian political scientist and essayist and minister of the revolutionary government of 1956. See Istvan Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-determination: Selected Writings*, Boulder: Atlantic R. and P., Columbia UP, Social Science Monographs, 1991.

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