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Central Europe: Utopia or Reality?

How long has it been since we read Kundera's essay on the tragedy of Central Europe in the American (!) journal *The New York Review of Books* and had the feeling that something was said which had been on the tip of our tongue for a long time? Then, in the middle of the eighties, it suddenly seemed that the truths of our lives were no longer ideologies and the closed claustrophobic spaces of national states but something wider, deeper and older. Without being aware when, we found ourselves in the "comedy club", as it was called by the late Slovene writer Marjan Rozanc. "Comic": because it contained a nostalgia for something which was outlived and which existed at the beginning of the century, an elusive and undetermined something which has been searched for throughout from the Baroque to the Fin de Siecle, from the literature of Musil, Roth, Kafka, Hasek, Krleza, from Cankar to Kundera, Konrad, Esterhazy and Magas; comic, because the truth about Central Europe has always been something vague, a strange Utopia which looked back and forth at the same time.

But it *was* a Utopia. We felt that we were reaching beyond unreasonable ideological schisms, beyond national borders and state jurisdictions, and things were discussed freely in this comedy club, discussions which ignored people with their eyes bloodstained by ideological and national hatred. Diversity, pluralism of ideologies, fragmentation, small nations, several languages spoken; all this cultural Babylon, which in half a century experienced bloody turmoil, the break up of states, changes of borders, the rise of ideological eschatology, majestic visions and tremendous disappointments, was the origin of a Utopia without which, as the Hungarian Konrad wrote, a man becomes stupid and loathsome. Without Central Europe, he wrote, all of our bigger cities develop into end stations, border- or perhaps even front-line cities. Many years ago, Peter Handke, tired of our daydreaming and debates, informed us that for him Central Europe was a question of weather; a simple meteorological notion. In an essay I agreed with this important statement, but I allowed myself to add that while it's nice to look at the sky and the clouds floating in it, it's also good to look under your feet, at least for as long as this Central Europe is strewn with mine fields, fenced in by wires and Berlin Walls. It is also good to look around oneself, since just at that time the border guards of the Yugoslav People's Army shot down a Czech family on the Mura river when they were swimming across from one country to another. From the "meteorological" point of view we would say: Why in God's name? Why did they have to swim where there was shooting? I proposed that – if no-one else – we who like looking at the clouds should invent something which would be equal to meteorological science. Perhaps a language spoken up there such as *altocumulus lenticularis*, */cirrus filozus radiatus*, *altostradus translucidus* and other names of celestial travellers; in short, a language which would create a possibility for the ideas, people and goods of Central Europe to circulate in the

same way as the air, wind and clouds above it.

Utopias, I wrote then, have this strange characteristic: they like to come true. And this one has come true earlier than anyone among us expected. The walls have fallen, the wires have disappeared: a piece of the Berlin Wall brought to me by my daughter got put on my shelf alongside a piece of wire from the Hungarian–Austrian border given me by my Hungarian translator. The people who died under shots on these borders are no longer remembered by anyone, life goes on; dust covered that Berlin stone and that piece of Hungarian wire in the Ljubljana apartment of this writer, until he stored them in a cardboard box. A grandiose idea, which had been living in the western part of the continent, has spread with the speed of light beyond the invisible borders: *Europe*. Our talk about that Central Europe became even more obsolete than before. It seemed we were advocating a really conservative idea. But the European idea is not something which first floated to the surface today. In the thirties, the Paneuropean ideal was very strong. (For an idea of how it worked in literature, see Ödön von Horvath's *The Eternal Philistine*.) And this idea, of course modernised, is today awakened with all its force and is on its triumphant journey. Nothing can stop it now.

We don't know what will come of all this. We shall see. It is at least clear to eastern Paneuropeans that Europe will not solve all their problems in the way that communism promised. Each country will have to make its own effort to help itself. This is a bitter but useful lesson. Here, people are inclined to solve problems which are beyond them; we can therefore expect they will refer to "all solutions" brought by "Europe". Each evening somebody thrusts European wisdom at us from the television. But this is nothing new. "The wings of stupidity" hover above Horvath's Paneuropeans, Kobler and Schmitz; new Paneuropeans, sit in today's Paneuropean homes and gape at the box which, in a bluish light, generates a terrible jumble of phrases and the magical babble of an inhuman language, and which solves issues in a simple and direct manner: the economy will flourish, standards will be set up, the poor will be rich, the rich will be even richer. The national question, the social question, women's issues... for Paneuropeans everything is settled, and in the worst case US troops will be sent to the Balkans. Everyone can calculate as Mr Schmitz did in *The Eternal Philistine*: there will be no war between European countries, since today it costs less to take advantage of a country in a peaceful way. Eastern Europeans understand that. Those who even yesterday daydreamed of Central Europe and thought of Viennese operettas today call from the bottom of their hearts: buy us, take advantage of, just don't leave us out of Europe.

Don't worry, responds the modern Mr Schmitz. We'll just wait a little longer. Fortunately it's too late for the melting pot for which our modern Europeans long in order to trade more easily, but it's never late for the wings of stupidity. In none of the systems we've seen, and in none of today's or the European future.

These comments should not be understood as opposition to European integration. Yes, I would like to see our country as part of European Integration, not least in order to overcome the totalitarian past at least in the field of the media and political life, and to start living normally. But now that the daydreaming is over and we face practical challenges, new questions have arisen:

For example: Does the emergence of a new and united Europe mean the birth of the spirit of philosophy or of the spirit of the economy? Aristotle and Plato

or Schröder (or better Kohl) and Chirac? If the new Europe is only a product of the economy and the Brussels administration, won't its labyrinths at the start of this century be the realisation of Kafka's labyrinths at the start of the last?

Or: If the new Europe is born as the answer to the United States, does this mean that its ties – except the economy, except a common area of free trade – will only be a popular culture with the lowest possible common denominator? Is the populism of pragmatic European policy at all ready to listen to the voice of a creative and intellectual elite?

And: Does the end of the twentieth century in Europe – with the end of the ideologies, big social and moral eschatological plans for our earthly existence – also mean the end of utopias? What is the result of the centuries of hope which ended with gulags and concentration camps? Does it suffice to know that we must not repeat this story? Are we ready to renounce any utopia because of this?

Also: What happened to the Europe which was born of the so-called socialism? Two kinds of Europe will exist for a long time. A fracture of the fifty years of socialism in the East divided the continent. Without the experience of Eastern Europe, the western part of the continent cannot understand the continent as a whole. It is true that people in the East exchanged one utopia for the other, the socialist for the European. But within more or less totalitarian systems, critical intellectuals from the eastern part of Central Europe developed a special feeling for those criteria, from Antiquity, Christianity and the Enlightenment, which make Europe more an area of common economy and laws, rather than an area of common self-awareness with all the blind searching and tragic experience of history. They also developed a sceptical thinking hardly known in the West. In short, is the East really only a desert of thought and creation? Is there no experience and idea in the East that could be and needs to be part of the understanding of integration?

Last but not least: What happens to the margins of Europe, small nations and their cultures, which originated from common European spiritual roots and also had a specific cultural development? Should we integrate them and let them be absorbed in the flow towards the centre? Isn't babbling about the identity of small nations, their languages and cultures merely an "ecological" question, while their meaning will be lost sooner or later?

These are the questions which were not been posed in the Comedy Club during our daydreaming about Central Europe, while utopias were being created. Our "Central Europe" was a floating idea, a blend of literary fictions, artistic projections and vague social concepts. Today I would put the question more realistically. I'd ask whether today's Germans or French know that a community such as that of which they speak today has already existed to a certain extent in miniature. Has anyone thought about learning from its experience? People here once co-existed in cultural diversity and economic and legislative equality. Central Europe was indeed a model for what Euro bureaucracy creates today. It seems today as if all the important currents of the twentieth century were conceived at its beginning. And today we can see how those different "liberating" ideas prepared themselves for its devastating and lethal march.

Despite this, today, in 2003, we have to say loudly and clearly that the idea of Central Europe was not an ideology. It can therefore not experience a decline or even the collapse to which all ideologies promising the best of all possible

worlds were doomed. "Central Europe" was a debate arising from historical, cultural and geographical facts. These facts are here and are here to stay.

Central Europe represents a two-fold experience: the co-existence of different cultures and individuals, potent creativity and tolerance *as well as* national and social hatred, harmful intolerance and violence. To live with such an experience, with this two-fold experience, to really be part of it, means to understand many things, means to be prepared for the good and bad surprises awaiting us in Paneuropean integration. Central Europe *means* understanding the world and life and *in its contradictions*. Therefore the utopia with which we lived in the eighties is not something about which we could now say: *Once upon a time...* It's still here... at least as long as we are alive.

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