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CENTRAL EUROPE: THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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“Central Europe”: 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall’ – some aspects of identity”

This paper is devoted to the discussion of changes of collective identities after 1989 and the process of social and cultural transformations in Central/Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall was and still remains a very powerful symbol of the post-WWII division of Europe and of the revolution of 1989 when this division ended. One can't hope to compete with this symbol for the power of its meaning, although for example in Poland there is a feeling that it was the Solidarity movement rather than the fall of Berlin Wall which was the true beginning of the change in Central Europe, and that the symbol of Solidarity ought to be given more recognition in this context. Poland is therefore trying to convince Europeans to this view of the past events and to have the Polish memory more recognized.

However, it was the Berlin Wall which was a boundary across Europe, and as such it played a crucial role in the process of construction of European identity. While it is generally recognised that the Wall's symbolism was negative, and belonged to the Cold War, it can be

argued that the Wall had also another, more positive function. It made it much easier to construct and represent the collective identity of Europe, or rather of its western part, in the process of building the European communities. In spite of many important differences between nation states and regions of Western Europe, it was relatively easy to construct an image of united Europe vis a vis the other, communist dominated Eastern Europe. Identity is always constructed in relations to significant others, it is this context of relations, interactions and dialogue, or just mutual perception, which makes an image of identity understandable and convincing. So it was easy to represent the European Communities and Europe of democracy, prosperity, market economy, and human rights, because of the other side of the boundary of Berlin Wall there was another Europe – dictatorial, poor, and oppressive. So the Wall, however dangerous and hostile to European values it was, also created a certain meaningful order in the world, made it understandable, even if not accepted for the reasons of morality and justice.

The fall of Berlin Wall put an end to this meaningful division. The process of building one, common, integrated Europe began, and it was obvious from the start that it would not be an easy process. One of the most important problems was how to create an image of Europe which would be based on common values and principles, but at the same time meaningfully limited in geographic but also social and political sense by a new boundary. Where should such a boundary be located? Who will be left on the other side, and thus denied the status of European? Who will then become a new significant other for all of us, Europeans of post-1989 era? In order for this new boundary to be convincing, people must see it as indeed dividing “us” from “them”. Of course this new boundary was never intended to be of a negative character, as it was the case of the Berlin Wall. It was not to become a symbol of hostility, oppression, artificial division supported by military power. But it ought to have a

meaning, create a new order in the world, divide the world between “us” – Europeans who represent some significant social, political or cultural values, from “them”, perhaps and hopefully friendly neighbours, but still neighbours, not “us”. I do not think that Europe is ready yet for the task of establishing such a new boundary, and therefore it is difficult for us to create a clear image of identity, answering in a plausible way a question who we are in relation to significant others.

Initially after 1989, one of the problems in creating a common, European identity of Europe not of 15 but of 25, now 28, was that we did not really know each other. Perhaps people in the East know their western co-Europeans better than vice versa, but this knowledge was not really accurate, largely mythologised and simplified. In the other direction, from West to East, there was not even a stereotype. An average western European knew next to nothing about for example Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania or Estonia, while the image of others, slightly more known eastern Europeans was very simplified and constructed in a form of “generalized Eastern European”. Even jokes and funny cartoons to be sold in souvenir shops in Brussels were hard to invent, as so-called ethnic jokes must be based on some easily recognised stereotypical associations. Since then the mutual knowledge has vastly improved, partly due to a large scale of migration of eastern Europeans to labour markets of the West.

A well organised and understood image of the social world provides people with a sense of security, mental security in addition to social and economic ones. A radical change, which the European enlargement certainly was to both parts of Europe, result in a considerable loss of this sense of mental security. Some people react to this by actively creating their own interpretation of the new social order, accepting it and building their own place in it, to their advantage. This was what many eastern European did by finding their place in the new,

European labour market, or starting their own business or looking for a new chance in further education. Others, however, reacted differently. One option was to hide behind known, familiar and therefore secure boundaries of tradition, religious fundamentalism or political conservatism. Tradition provides us with ready-made answers to all questions, therefore it is a convenient alternative for those who feel lost in the ever-changing world of radical transformation of social and economic reality and waves of new ideas. Others search for guidance in strong leadership, vote for populist politicians who promise easy solution and expect not activity but passive support. This may be a reason of the growth of right wing politics in many parts of Europe. This decrease of mental security is experienced on both sides of the Berlin Wall. The West fears a flood of eastern immigrants, stealing their jobs and bringing unacceptable way of life. For those Europeans Europe became too big, and too unfamiliar and they refused to give permission to further enlargement od deeper integration. France and the Netherlands rejected the Constitution Treaty, as it was one thing to integrate among the familiar 15 and an entirely different thing to integrate among the much less known Europeans of 25/27. In the East the loss of mental security was connected with the feeling that the openness was dangerous and the new Europe was too strong as a competitor, that the new frame of reference for cultural memory, ideas, ways of life, was not only new and strange but also be dangerous to the newcomers.

It was difficult for the new Europeans to feel that they belong to Europe. The EU was and is accepted, but mainly as a useful and generous provider of “manna from heavens”. But to benefit from the European membership was one thing and to feel they we belong and are responsible for Europe may be quite a different issue. In Poland for example Europe is still seen and “them”, rather than “us”, even if the Polish population gives an overwhelming support to the membership in the EU. He Polish government is now quickly learning their

European belonging and political identity. At first they behave as outsiders, trying to get involved in decision making process only when Polish direct interests were at stake, but not really feeling competent or interested to speak about the EU as such. They were fighting for the right to have a blocking power in European decisions, but not so much for a possibility to successfully propose new initiatives. Now they are learning that Poland need European structures and that for Poland the more Europe the better. This approach does not, however, yet involve attitudes towards cultural and social issues. Poland has not yet fully accepted the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and many Poles, even in the leadership, still believe that Poland has its own recipe for a good, traditional, morel way of life. The low level of identification with Europe among most Poles is reflected, among others, by the extremely low turnout at European elections. For the moment the EU is still popular, because of the economic benefits it brings. But it is essential to think now about a way to make people more European, to create a sense of belonging to Europe and to be collectively responsible for it, because otherwise when the money has finished it will be difficult to maintain the high level of support.

The financial crisis was for us all an important lesson. I believe that the lesson contained also some very significant positive elements. We learned that we need Europe to overcome it, and that we need more European identity to be prepared to respond to new such challenges if and when they come. We need more feeling of belonging and collective responsibility. It is well-known that democracy requires collective identity. We know this from the national level of social organisation. The same is true for Europe. We need more European identity in order to build a European demos. But the relation works both ways. Identity also needs democracy. Identity is not just a process of image creation. It is also involvement, “doing”, not just representing. If we are active in a given frame of reference, if we develop

collectively project and various forms of activities, then we also develop a feeling of belonging and responsibility. Therefore we at the European level must involve more and more citizens in various forms of activities, in the European frame of reference. Involvement will generate identity.

For the societies of Central Europe this is a particularly important issue. They are building or rebuilding their democracies and reconsidering and developing their collective identities on different levels and in a different, new, European frame of reference. They have to learn a new lesson of how to cooperate on the European level, and also on local, and regional levels. The lesson is not easy, as in the Central European region there is a long tradition of oppression, fighting for survival and for traditional identity, there is a strong memory of suffering and victimisation, while the level of trust and citizenship is low. Our historical memory must be reconsidered in such a way that it can be understood elsewhere in Europe. We must communicate in a language that is understood in the whole of Europe, and our struggle for recognition of our past experience and the lesson which it brings to Europe must take a form of open dialogue. Europe created a new space of communication, and we must use it better. Central Europe has many meanings, but it was often used as a boundary to separate those countries which believed that they were closer to Europe from those Eastern neighbours who often were seen as inferior. This is not a good way to build Europe. We must negotiate our new identities, and do it in the European frame of reference of symbols and memories. Such a dialogue, combined with more involvement in institutionalised European projects may create a common, European identity and European demos.