On the Road to Nowhere: Transition, The Extreme Right and The Tunnel Effect

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In current parlance, the "Transition" appears as a dialectical process bringing two Europes, unnaturally separated in time, back together at last. In the dialectic of the Transition, Central (and Eastern) Europeans are travelling West - to the good life, the right life. In this dialectic there is a movement from the difficult here-and-now of everyday existence to prosperity and normality. What is to be achieved is not utopia - rather it is the present that is abnormal. The fantasy of what is to come is a dream of what has been, the good life of the West, brutally torn away by the utopia of Communism. In this vision, Europe (always the West) is everything those in Berlin (or Brussels) ever claimed it to be, and those joining Europe from the East are returning to their natural heritage. This vision is held as much in the West as the East, with differing variations on the psychological, cultural and physical boundaries of the West. It takes its crudest and most exclusive form in the "Clash of Civilizations" outlined by American scholar Samuel P. Huntington. [1] It is echoed by statesmen and women from Western Europe who sing the praises of Europe and European Civilization, by which, naturally, they do not mean Hitler's Europe.

"The West assumed, quite incorrectly, that the communist utopia would be replaced by the modernist utopia of capitalism and perhaps by the postmodern utopia of tolerance." [2]

- Stjepan Mestrovic

To the proponents of this ideal, "evil" - referring to a host of anti-democratic and illiberal forces ranging from xenophobia and racism to poverty and unemployment - is not European at all. Europe is liberal democracy (civilization), free market capitalism (prosperity) and a touch of redistribution (equality). In the Western tradition, Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us, *"the pan-European world represented modernity, evolution, progress"*. [3]

The problem with this vision is precisely what's on offer when it falters - when economic and social transition engenders suffering. Suffering citizens may search for alternatives, even to allowing their democracies become illiberal. [4] Furthermore, I will argue that a return to illiberal forms of democracy is not *a priori* anti-European, for those who offer illiberal solutions may openly redefine that much-touted Europeanism in the service of electoral legitimacy. After all, Hitler is as much a product of German civilization as is Goethe, Mussolini just as Italian as Garibaldi, and the fascist leader Szalasi as Hungarian as the freedom fighter Kossuth.

The EU tunnel

To point this out is not to denounce the architects of the positive vision of European civilization. The rejection of the heritage of that *other* Europe, the heritage of war, intolerance, racism, anti-Semitism and ethnic hatred is a noble project. But here I attempt rather to explore the possible ramifications of what may happen when that positive view of Europe is reassessed in the light of economic pressures in Central and Eastern Europe, using Albert Hirschman's concept of a "tunnel effect" [5] - defined as a period during which citizens in countries undergoing economic restructuring will endure hardship with the promise of a better life to come. As the tunnel effect fades, people will come to feel that their suffering and deprivation was for nothing, and may search for alternatives to the current social and political system.

To what extent does the aspiration to join the EU in much of Central Europe correspond to Hirschman's "tunnel effect"? In a recent poll taken in Hungary, some 83% of respondents felt that entering the European Union would bring positive changes to Hungary, with even more assessing a positive effect for their own families. [6] Even in Serbia, a country that had seemingly rejected Europe in the past, and with virtually no hope of EU accession in the near

future, President Vojislav Kostunica campaigned and won on a platform of re-integration with Europe.

Political economist Jose Maria Maravall poses the question as follows: *"When citizens suffer economic hardship under new democratic regimes, which are often receiving assistance in carrying out needed economic reforms from international organizations, is it reasonable for them to think that they would fare better under an authoritarian regime?"* [7]

Maravall's optimistic conclusion is that *"If [democratic reformers] manage their mandates skilfully, take advantage of their windows of opportunity, and work hard to build consensus in their societies, their risk of failure will diminish."* [8] The "windows of opportunity" here are equivalent to Hirschman's tunnel. They will not stay open indefinitely.

The evidence of the suffering caused by the transition in Eastern Europe is overwhelming. Since the transition began, throughout the region there have been: declines in life expectancy; an extraordinary rise in poverty; high levels of morbidity; increased wealth inequality; a rise in gender inequalities; the deterioration of educational systems; rises in unemployment; and a rise in crime rates. In one of the most shocking reports on the transition, the United Nations' 1999 *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS*, Anton Kruiderink cites a study that found: *"In 1989 approximately 14 million people in the former Communist bloc lived on less than $4 a day. By the mid-1990s that number had risen to about 147 million."* [9] On page after page the report lists grim statistics of the costs of transition to people in countries who had little or no prior historical experience with democracy. [10]

Ominously, the report also suggests that throughout the region there has been a widespread confusion of democratic and free market ideology with the eventual goal of joining Western Europe. It takes little to reach the conclusion that continued economic suffering and isolation from the European goal can lead to dangerous frustration and anomie.

"It is our conception that, from the point of view of development and progress, humanity moves toward community systems and toward integration. But naturally there are differentiations alongside the process of integration, and those nations will initially differentiate who are called upon to lead from within the community. For there can be no movement without an axis."

- Hungarian Fascist Leader Ferenc Szalasi during his prosecution for war crimes. Feb. 25, 1946. [11]

Normal Europeans

However, acknowledging the dangers of recession in Central and Eastern Europe, and the possibility of delayed accession to the EU, does not constitute a refutation of the region's essential Europeanness. The recent Serbian tragedy is well known to the West, an egregious example of "dangerous Eastern extremism". [12] Less appreciated is the fact that, as against the 20% scored by Haider's Freedom Movement in the 2000 Austrian elections, and Le Pen's 15% in France, [13] the extremist MIEP party in Serbia's neighbouring Hungary garnered barely 5% of the vote.

Some researchers have provided serious data that seems to indicate high degrees of racism in Eastern Europe in general (and Hungary in particular). [14] Concern about extremism in Europe is justified. But what is less often observed is how feelings of European superiority arising from Western stereotypes of Eastern extremism insidiously serve to reinforce the extreme right in both East and West Europe. In certain "studies" one suspects barely concealed desires to close the gates of Europe to the barbarians without.

One example of such Eurocentric bias is a 1999 report titled "Democratic, Authoritarian and Multiculturalist Attitudes in Eastern Europe: A comparison with other world regions in a survey of 44 countries". [15] Its (Western) authors determine that Western Europe is the most pro-democratic region of the world, followed by Africa, then North America. Eastern Europe,

presumably including Central Europe and the Balkan states, is presented as one of the most anti-democratic regions in the world, followed only by the category "CIS-Russia". Western Europe is also judged to be least authoritarian, least pro-military, most pro-multi-culture, and most pro-reform. The authors conclude that Western Europe and Oceania rank top two for openness, liberalism, and democracy (Western Europe coming first), while East Europe and CIS-Russia are at the bottom. The true lesson about prejudice is apparently unintended. [16]

"The shift from an underlying optimism about the future, from the certainty that things would in fact get better, to an underlying fear that this may not be so, has reached the wealthy part of the world" [17]

- Immanuel Wallerstein on Haider

It is my contention that, in a perverse way, the extremist movements of Europe beyond-the-pale prove the region's Europeaness just as much as do the liberal intellectual traditions that Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the other nations at the edge of the West claim as their own. Further, I would argue that perceptions of long-term deprivation, increasing income discrepancies, and relative poverty in Central and Eastern Europe will strengthen extremists within the European Union as much as without.

This is partly because in times of stress the distinction made between European liberals and extremists can break down under closer examination. In an essay about student demonstrations against Milosevic in 1996-97, Serbian political anthropologist Ivan Colovic noted the Western orientation of the student demonstrators in Belgrade who expressed their desire to join Europe and to have "normal" lives. Colovic warned, however, against overly optimistic interpretations of the students' pro-European stance. When attacked by the police, young demonstrators were heard to chant "Go to Kosovo!" - implying that the police would be better off beating up Albanians. [18]

"It is remarkable....to find out how often and how eloquently Hitler spoke of Europe: of Europe at peace, of respect, and equal rights for European neighbours, of 'European co-operation' and Franco-German reconciliation, and then again of peace and friendship." [19]

- Timothy Garton Ash.

Moreover, we must recall that some extremists frequently vouchsafe a belief in "European civilisation". They are not anti-European: if anything they too proclaim their Europeaness. But theirs is a parochial "fortress Europe", in which their country has a natural place. Theirs is a 'different' Europe, [20] a Europe of intolerance, bigotry, immigration quotas (or outright bans), barely disguised under the name of protection of culture. [21] A Europe that ends just to the East, just where true difference is seen as starting. It is here, in their definition of the European project, that Western and Eastern extremists can find common ground for popular support. Thus Hungarians are not "Balkan", Serbs are not "Turks". And German and Czech skinheads share a common hatred of the Roma.

We cannot attempt to predict Europe's future. Rather than making irresponsible generalizations about Eastern European society as a whole, we can only isolate the extremists in our midst. The danger they pose is real and immediate. But, far from being barbarians beating on the gates of Europe, they are of Europe, and are therefore all the more dangerous. No new iron curtain can keep extremists out, for they have always been within the heart of Europe itself. Given their belief systems, the politics of exclusion can only make them stronger, both within and without the European Union. For fears of intolerant, incompatible Easterners feed Western feelings of superiority, and thereby Western politics of intolerance, while exclusion, isolation and anomie can strengthen the base of support for Eastern demagogues.

Sources:

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Footnotes

[1] S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, London, 1998.

[2] S.G. Mestrovic, *The Balkanization of the West*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 55.

[3] I. Wallerstein, "The Albatross of Racism", *London Review of Books*, May 18, 2000.

[4] Phrase borrowed from: F. Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997.

[5] See A. O. Hirschman, "The Changing Tolerance for Income Inequality in the Course of Economic Development" from *Essays in Trespassing*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

[6] G. Lengyel, Z. Blasko, J.P. Martin, "Vállalkozói félelmek és várakozások az Európai Unióhoz való csatlakozás kapcsán" in Kolosi, Toth and Vukovich (eds.) *Tarsadalmi Riport 2000*, TARKI, 2000, p. 382.

[7] J.M. Maravall, "The Myth of Authoritarian Advantage", in L. Diamond, and M.F. Plattner, *Economic Reform and Democracy*, John Hopkins, Baltimore, 1995, p. 14.

[8] Maravall, p. 25.

[9] A. Kruiderink, Introduction to *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS*, UNDP, New York, New York, 1999, p. IV.

[10] To be sure, there are also countries that have undergone the enormous costs of transition with little or no accompanying experience of liberal democracy.

[11] F. Szalasi, "Az utolsó szó jogán" *Hungarizmus*, Gede Testverek, Budapest. 2000 p. 309.

[12] I refer to Serbia and Hungary in particular because these neighbours might arguably be taken as paradigmatic for the two ends of the spectrum of transition experience.

[13] See "The ugly side of European politics" in *The Economist*, April 30, 1998.

[14] For a somewhat apocalyptic examination of the potentialities of the extreme right world wide, and in Hungary in particular see G.M. Tamas, "On Post-Fascism", Boston Review. Summer, 2000. On Hungary see also E. Sik, "The level and social basis of xenophobia in

contemporary Hungary" from Enyedi and Eros (eds.) *Authoritarianism and Prejudice*, Osiris, Budapest, 1999.

[15] J. D. Meloen, and R. Farnen, "Democratic, Authoritarian and Multiculturalist Attitudes in Eastern Europe: A comparison with other world regions in a survey of 44 countries." In Enyedi and Eros.

[16] It is beyond the scope of this paper to refute or support the authors' claims. However, although at first glance their data is impressive, it hardly offers substantial support for their conclusions. Their data comes from *"Almost 10,000 student respondents from 44 countries (who) answered a survey questionnaire between 1991 and 1997"* (p. 277.) In other words, assuming equal distribution of respondents among countries, each of the 44 countries was represented by only 227 respondents, with responses collected over a period of seven years.

[17] I. Wallerstein, "The Albatross of Racism", *London Review of Books*, May 18, 2000.

[18] I. Colovic, "Volim I Ja Vas", in *Politika Simbola*, B92 Press, 1997, p. 290: "Ali takav optimizam kvarili su demonstranti koji su policajcima, dovedenim iz cele zemlje da od demonstranata brane vlast, cesto dobacivali "Idite na Kosovo!".

[19] T. Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name*, Jonathan Cape, 1993, p. 20.

[20] For a description of such attitudes see F. A. Hajdu "MIÉP: egy nemzeti szocialista párt" (MIEP: A national-socialist party) *Mozgo Vilag*. 2001/3.

[21] On the new racism see: R. Salecl, "The Ideology of the Mother Nation in the Yugoslav Conflict" in Kennedy, Michael D. (ed.) *Envisioning Eastern Europe*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.