

Radical Change Under Way in Central and Eastern Europe

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In central and eastern Europe, the subject of my talk, communism has gone. Most of the region's countries are in the EU and Nato (parts of the Balkans being the notable exceptions, plus the slightly different cases of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and even Georgia). Gone, too, is the sense - almost always misplaced, I would say - that the region should be thought of as an area sufficiently different from western Europe, and from Russia, that all the countries in it belong in one category.

It's this misunderstanding that tempts us to keep on comparing them with each other, rather than with countries beyond the region, and to keep on using post-1989 scorecards like "democracy", "the rule of law", "economic progress", "nationalism", "attitudes to Russia" and so on.

For the reality is not only that the countries of central and eastern Europe are extremely varied, but also that nowadays, over 30 years after the end of communism, they have in some respects more and more in common with western European countries - certainly more than at any time since 1945. For example, if you go to the Baltic states, you'll be struck by how much Estonia and Latvia in particular resemble their Nordic neighbours, which are also their closest allies in the EU, Nato and international organisations generally. In economic terms, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are all integrated into the German and to some extent Austrian business worlds.

Politically speaking, much is made of issues such as democratic backsliding, the growth of rightwing populism, corruption and organised crime. But, of course, we see nationalist populism flourishing in the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Italy and other western European countries as well as in Hungary, Poland (until recently), Slovakia, Serbia and elsewhere to the east.

And the similarities between east and west go further than that.

Election results in western, central and eastern Europe deliver comparable outcomes insofar as liberal, progressive, internationalist parties and candidates tend to do best in the capitals and big cities - Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw, Gdańsk, Belgrade in the east, London,

Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna to the west. Nationalists and conservatives do better in smaller towns and rural areas. The reasons are similar: the big cities tend to be better connected and more comfortable with the outside world, and they've flourished in the age of economic globalisation more than smaller towns and the countryside.

Having said all this, it's striking how older patterns of political allegiance and outlook persist in some central and eastern European countries. For example, liberal or progressive parties in Poland tend to do best in western and south-western areas that were once part of the German or Austro-Hungarian empires before the first world war. By contrast, the main conservative nationalist, Catholic-oriented party, Law and Justice (PiS), is strongest in the east and south-east, once part of the Russian empire. That could be explained by the more advanced economic development of western and south-western Poland.

If there's one big difference between western Europe and central and eastern Europe, it's that the first area didn't have to undergo the wrenching transformation from communism to the market, and from dictatorship to democracy, that the second area did after 1989. Now, as I well remember, not only the anti-communist dissidents of 1989 but also most societies as a whole in the east, at the time, were united in two goals: building liberal, free-market democracies and joining Euro-Atlantic institutions – the EU and Nato.

Well, they achieved the second goal, and to this day there's very little appetite for quitting the EU and Nato, even with a maverick, illiberal leader like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. But the respect which central and eastern European countries paid to the west with regards to the first goal, a liberal market democracy, took a heavy blow with the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. This caused politicians and the general public in central and eastern Europe to question whether the western model of financial market capitalism was all it was cracked up to be.

At the same time, the central and eastern Europeans were becoming more uncomfortable about the idea that they should be encouraged or required to embrace aspects of the western European social and cultural model, which they took to include large-scale immigration, deChristianisation, multiculturalism and other trends likely, so they thought, to stir up racial or religious tensions. For the central and eastern Europeans, who had grown used to living in states with almost no national or religious minorities (partly a consequence of massive population transfers after the second world war), social trends in western Europe looked distinctly undesirable.

All this opened up space for leaders like Orbán, or Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, or Janez Janša in Slovenia, to propose a new type of politics based on a rightwing cultural agenda mixed with a more state interventionist economic policy. You now see something similar, by the way, in the ideas of Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia in Italy. In parts of the east, this policy mix comes with the heavy hand of illiberalism or even authoritarianism in other areas of public life, as the dominant party seizes control of the judiciary, turns state media into its mouthpiece, puts its placemen in charge of important industries and regulatory bodies, rewrites the constitution and redraws electoral rules and districts to suit itself.

We should keep in mind, as well, that the concept of freedom in central and eastern Europe is different in some important ways from the way it's understood in much of western Europe, particularly the original European Economic Community six. Freedom in the east means not only individual liberty but national independence - something that resonates strongly with countries that were once wiped off the map of Europe by larger neighbours (think of Poland from 1795 to 1918, and from 1939 to 1945), or annexed (think of the Baltic states and Stalin), or, in fact, were never genuinely independent in their entire history until after 1989 (think of Slovakia, Slovenia or what we now call North Macedonia).

For some of these countries, the idea of a European Union destined to become ever more politically integrated is not attractive, because it threatens the hard-won sovereignty of 1989 and the early 1990s. Still, the region is not unanimous in its views. For the Baltic states, the supreme question is how to avoid falling under Moscow's control again, and they are very small in terms of population and geography, so they find a sense of security in the EU as well as Nato. For larger countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary or Poland, a more strenuous defence of sovereignty seems feasible, so they resist certain EU initiatives - on asylum and migration, for example - and, significantly, they have not joined the eurozone.

In general, I think it was more or less inevitable, given the region's 20th-century history - a history of unparalleled violence and terror, combined with the acquisition and then loss of national sovereignty - that the road to liberal democracy after 1989 would through a nationalist detour.

One thing the region's peoples are agreed on is that they aren't and shouldn't be called purely "eastern European". And I do sympathise with that. After all, perhaps the only reason people of my generation ever thought of them as eastern is that we were brought up in the Cold War,

and so we had an ineradicable mental map of Europe as split down the middle into a prosperous, free west that was easy to visit and a benighted, backward, totalitarian east that was closed off or hard to visit. The fact that Prague actually lies further to the west than Vienna seemed quirky and not worth paying attention to.

But I remember once working for Reuters for a while in East Berlin and making a passing reference, in a conversation with an East Berliner, to “east Germany”. He shook his head, wagged his finger and said: “Herr Barber, over there [and he pointed to the left] is western Germany. Here, in Berlin, is central Germany. And over there [and he pointed to the right] is eastern Germany.”

What he meant was that eastern Germany is, or for centuries was, the old lands of East Prussia, with its capital of Königsberg, the city of Immanuel Kant. East Prussia was, of course, erased from the map and distributed between the new communist Poland and the Soviet Union, which renamed Königsberg Kaliningrad. But you see his point: only the redrawing of frontiers and ideological contest of the Cold War made us apply, for 40-odd years after 1945, these artificial categories of west and east.

Let me conclude with some remarks about the Balkans, which it does seem to me is a region distinctive in its own right.

In other parts of central and eastern Europe, national, ethnic minority or border rivalries, such as those between Germany and Poland, or Hungary and Romania, were generally overcome with considerable success after 1989. There is some stirring of the pot now, but it's been really rather remarkable to see, for example, the election of an ethnic German, Klaus Iohannis, as president of Romania. Just today, an ethnic Albanian, Talat Xhaferi, was appointed prime minister of North Macedonia. Think of that - in a Slav majority country that experienced an armed ethnic Albanian uprising a mere two decades ago.

But most Balkan states, after the break-up of Yugoslavia, have struggled to handle these minorities and border problems, which are closely bound up with other issues such as fragile state institutions, corruption and organised crime - often tied, as in Serbia, to politics, business and the security police. You may noticed that the US government last year imposed sanctions on the then head of Serbian state security for precisely this reason.

The Balkan paradox is that states are simultaneously strong and weak: strong enough to manipulate elections, bully political opponents and bend the law to their purposes; but not strong enough to guarantee

many citizens jobs, financial security and welfare. Longstanding ethnic rivalries, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, provide the perfect excuse for politicians to retain a grip on power by claiming they alone can be trusted to defend their national group and its privileges.

The interplay of these factors is one reason why I am not wholly convinced by the apparent new vigour with which the EU is pursuing the goal of enlargement into the Balkans. Many of the local elites, having seen how Brussels has tried to discipline Hungary and Poland over the rule of law, and looking at all the other EU rules and regulations designed to ensure fair competition and the supremacy of European law, may well be thinking, I fear, that EU membership would actually be a threat to their power and their way of conducting themselves in their own countries.

And then there is another obstacle: the methods used by existing EU member states to extract concessions from would-be members on matters not just of trade or the budget, but of historical memory, national identity and minority rights. We see this right now from Bulgaria with regard to North Macedonia, and from Greece with regard to Albania.

It is all too easy to imagine Croatia doing the same with regard to Serbia one day - if Serbia really wants to join the EU, which I have my doubts about.

Still, I do appreciate that keeping the EU membership road open is essential. If it's ever closed, there is a real risk that one day the region will experience a new surge of activism for a Greater Serbia, or even a Greater Albania, and other countries will get sucked into the morass as well.