

Out of the Ice and into the Fire

Jacques Rupnik

As Vaclav Havel quite succinctly summed up the events of these days, history is once again “on the move”. But which history? That of the “People’s Spring” of 1848, or that of the interwar period, a time of abortive democracies and nationalistic conflicts? Are not the old ethnic conflicts already back to centre stage as the Soviet Union appears to be exiting to the wings? Following the euphoria of the autumn of democracy, is there not a chilling doubt already gripping some Western governments? One order is in collapse, and as yet no coherent alternative has been drafted. The old imperial *status quo*, while without question morally abject, was at least somewhat predictable and to a certain extent comforting in the end—from the point of view of the West, of course.

Truthfully, in the East, there is little spare time to afford to such queries. The historical reference for the “peaceful revolution” of which Havel spoke is linked more to the “People’s Spring” of 1848 or to the advent of independence in 1918, two privileged epochs when intellectuals were the spokesmen of the democratic and national aspirations of a whole people.

Following the model of Masaryk (the Czechoslovak philosopher-president during the interwar period), Havel represents for the Czechs the synthesis of newly refound national freedom and sovereignty, with all the ambiguity such a notion involves. In October, demonstrators in Leipzig chanted “*Wir sind das Volk*” (we are *the* people). After the opening of the Berlin Wall the following month, the same demonstrators began to chant “*Wir sind ein Volk*” (we are *one*

people), a revealing semantic slip: from democracy, they moved to reunification. The duality of the present revolutionary process in the East lies precisely in these two slogans, in these two theses of the movement.

From this point, one can ask what will spring out of the "black box" of Central Eastern European societies after the death of communism. The de-Sovietisation of this other Europe feeds anticipation of German reunification, but does it not also signal the reappearance of nationalistic conflicts, hitherto suppressed by imperial power? There is no lack of plaintiffs among the "sister countries", with disputes over borders and national minorities, to mention a few. From the Baltic to the Adriatic, who can be certain of remaining unaffected?

Inheritance of an era

An undeniable indication of what has become the "European Game" is that 1989 was the year of population wandering, the largest transfer of population since the last war. It is estimated that over one million persons have left their respective countries. The main cause of this tide of emigration? Nationalist conflicts explain the 320,000 Bulgarian Turks expelled to Turkey, the 50,000 Romanian citizens (mostly Hungarians from Transylvania) who sought refuge in Hungary and the more than 70,000 Germans, originating from the Soviet bloc, who arrived in the FRG in 1989.

The roots of all these nationality disputes are to be found in the repressed history of that part of the world. Due to the extent of ethnic variety, it was absolutely impossible to draw state borders which would correspond with ethnic divisions. Thus a paradox was created after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the pillar of geopolitical stability in Central Europe suddenly under pressure from a rise in nationalism and from the consequences of the First World War. This paradox consists in the fact that the new nation-states created under the patronage of France and President Wilson were no such thing in reality. With the exception of Hungary, which had been deeply wounded by the Versailles Treaty, all these states encompassed large national minorities that represented, according to the respective countries, between one quarter and one third of the population.

In the period from 1918 to 1945, the Central Eastern European states entered into a "private civil war" over borders and national minorities. Just one

example regards the Munich settlement (1938), which not only gave the green light to Hitler's occupation of the Sudeten Czechoslovak territories, but also to Poland's annexation of the region of Teschen which was populated by Poles, Czechs and Germans, as well as of Hungary's "recuperation" of a piece of Slovakia inhabited by Hungarians.

In 1945, there was a return to the Versailles *status quo*, but the nationality "puzzle" was nevertheless simplified through further population transfer and border rectification. Romania regained Transylvania (along with 1.5 million Hungarians) but lost Bessarabia (which became the Soviet Republic of Moldavia) and Bucovina (incorporated into the Ukraine). Bulgaria kept the south of Dobrudja, but had to give up Macedonia (annexed during the war), which became one of the Yugoslav republics. Poland's borders were extended to the West, losing some of the Ukrainian, Belorussian and Lithuanian minorities in the east, while more than 10 million Germans were expelled from the territories newly gained in the west. More than 10 million Germans were expelled from Poland and Czechoslovakia. It was the end of Eastern Prussia, and Königsberg, the town of Kant and Hannah Arendt, became Kaliningrad. Countess Dönhoff, editor of the weekly *Die Zeit*, recently described in the magazine her return after 45 years to the town of her birth: "Unrecognisable!" she exclaimed, "Kaliningrad looks more like Irkutsk than Königsberg!" The same exclamation is valid for what once constituted the ethnic and cultural pluralism of the towns of Central Europe, as described by Kundera and Czeslaw Milosz.

Ancient conflicts have been revived by the subsiding of Soviet interventionism. The workings of history have gained new impetus from the decomposition of the Soviet empire, especially in the Balkans, and this can be seen explicitly in three particular nationalistic disputes: in Romania (ethnic Hungarians), in Bulgaria (Bulgarian Turks) and in Yugoslavia (ethnic Albanians in Kosovo province).

Europe's Lebanon

In the first instance, this applies to the problem of Transylvania. Reformist Hungary has since been leading an active campaign for the protection of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. Undoubtedly, the entire population of Romania fell victim to a level of poverty and repression unequalled in the rest of Europe, but on top of this, the Hungarian minority suffered a most particular

form of cultural and linguistic discrimination. The "systemisation" programme, which meant the destruction of 7000 villages (many of which were inhabited by Hungarians) in order to create agro-alimentary centres in their place, provoked a renewed escalation of tensions between the two countries. Hungary has become a country of asylum for tens of thousands of Romanian citizens, making the iron curtain pass between two countries of the Warsaw Pact. The moment Hungary opened its borders to the West, its border with its eastern neighbour closed.

Under Ceausescu, the official Romanian stance hung on the criticism of a blend of Hungarian ideological "revisionism" and its so-called territorial revisionism. General Ilie Ceausescu, brother of Nicolae and then Vice Minister of Defence, explained that confronted by serious domestic problems, the Budapest regime had "intensified its policy of territorial revisionism, which in many ways had already gone further than that adopted by the Horthy regime".

Hungary did not just sit back and listen. Imre Pozsgay, head of the reformist wing of the Hungarian Communist Party, called the Romanian systemisation plan for Hungarian villages "a crime against humanity". More serious still is recurrent and open talk in Budapest of "the Romanian military threat".

The first to put forward this notion was the head of the international department of the old Communist Party, Csaba Tabadji. In an interview with *La Stampa* in June 1989, he declared that Hungary had had to modify its strategic doctrine "to encompass new evaluations of potential threats. Today, the great majority of Hungarians know that an eventual attack will not come from the west but from the southeast". In order to make this point totally clear, Imre Pozsgay added that Hungarian troops would be moved from the border with Austria, to the border with Romania. And as if to dramatise the threat of conflict for the benefit of the international community, the Hungarian Foreign Affairs Minister Gyula Horn declared in July 1989 that Romania was also reviewing its strategic doctrine and that it had access to medium-range missiles, even to atomic weapons!

While these "revelations" from Hungary should be taken with caution, if one expects that the fall of the Ceausescu regime will hush the anti-Hungarian campaign in Romania, and that in Budapest allowances will be made once a Parliament has been elected, there remains in all this a new element: two Warsaw Pact countries designating each other as "enemy number one".



Europe at the table

The fall of the Ceausescu regime began with the revolt of the Hungarian minority in the town of Timisoara. Grasping the symbolic importance of the event, the Protestant minister Laszlo Tokes declared that the end of the dictatorship was the "last chance" for Hungarian-Romanian relations in Transylvania.

Is there still a last chance? Can a reawakening of nationalism be mastered in the post-Communist world? Nothing is less certain. Two legacies of the past must in fact be overcome: the legacy of traditional nationalism and that of the Communist regimes. Variations of "xenophobic communism" are in no short supply, and in particular in the Balkans: Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. For many years the Bulgarian campaign with regard to Yugoslav Macedonia (Macedonians were simply considered Bulgarians) acted as the barometre for relations between Moscow and Belgrade. Bulgaria was simply considered

"its master's voice". Since the arrival of Gorbachev, however, things have been different.

A second case for nationalistic worries is that of Bulgaria. In 1985, the Stalinist regime of Todor Zhivkov undertook a violent campaign of "Bulgarisation" of names within the Turkish minority community of almost one million inhabitants, or 10 per cent of the population. The justification was that these people were simply Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted to Islam under the Ottoman Empire five centuries ago. Thus Rashid was to become Rashidov, *manu militari* if necessary. Several hundreds died as a result of the campaign and several hundreds of thousands sought refuge in Turkey. The aim had been the elimination of a national minority, but it was also an attempt by the struggling Bulgarian regime at calming aspirations for democratic change, using the nationalist campaign as an antidote. Zhivkov, in a speech on May 29, 1989, accused "foreign forces" of attempting to provoke unrest in Bulgaria. But instead of attacking the traditional scapegoat Yugoslavia, he invoked the Turkish threat: "groups which feed the hope of bringing back the days of the Ottoman Empire".

The wheel of history has since crushed the man who had ruled Bulgaria single-handedly for 35 years, but this has not been sufficient to bring about a settling down of nationalist feelings in Bulgaria. Indeed, the first promise of concessions to the Turkish minority in January 1990 were met by vehement protest by from Bulgarian population, and most prominently, by the very partisans of *glasnost*. Such was the outcry that one can rightly fear nationalism as a major obstacle to the introduction of democratic reform in Bulgaria.

The third instance of major conflict in the Balkan powder keg is the Serbian-Albanian dispute over Kosovo Province. At the outset, it appears a classic case, (analogous to that of Transylvania): two nations consider the same territory as the centrepiece of their national identity. Since the nineteenth century the Albanians have considered Kosovo as the cornerstone of Albanian unity. For the Serbs, Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian medieval empire: the idea of abandoning it is unthinkable. Albanians living in Kosovo are—thanks to Yugoslavia—the most developed and free of the Albanian nation. Perhaps they dream of a "Greater Albania", but not at all of simply being annexed by the regime in Tirana. A Greater Albania could only be born of a simultaneous opening up of Albania and the disintegration of the Yugoslav state.

This appears to be already underway. The tribal warfare between Christian Serbs and Moslem Albanians in Kosovo provoked a chain reaction of nationalist claims, spreading from the south to the north of the country. The Albanians reawakened Serbian nationalism which in turn reawakened Slovenian and Croatian nationalism. Last September, faced with a Serbia considered—due to the image of leader Slobodan Milosevic—nationalist-populist, authoritarian and centralising, Slovenia (indifferent to the fate of the Serbes of Kosovo) accelerated the move towards democracy and voted for the right to secession. In Ljubljana sights are focussed less on Belgrade, and more on Vienna, Trieste or Budapest, on the *Mitteleuropa* Slovenia belonged to until 1918. For the Slovenians, a move away from Belgrade represents a departure from communism, and this is mistakenly understood as necessarily meaning leaving Yugoslavia behind. The disintegrations of the Communist system and of the Yugoslavian state reinforce one another. Only Serbian military dictatorship (according to the pessimists) or a true confederation (say the optimists) could prevent the shattering—the “Lebanonisation”—of the Balkans.

History comes home

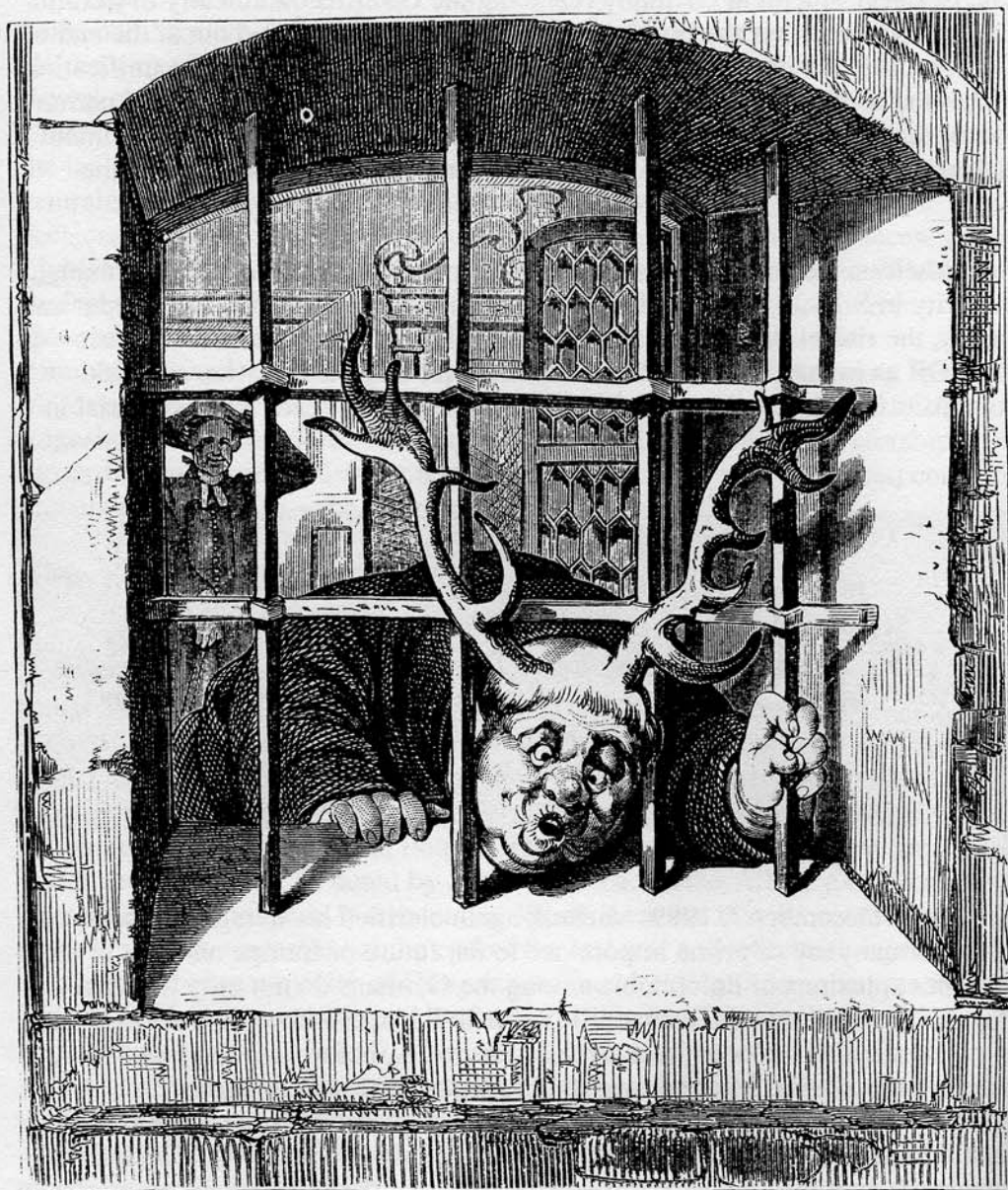
Unlike in the Balkans, however, the national problem in Central Europe will be determined as it has often been in history by the German question and by the future of the Russian empire. It is not a question of minorities, which in this instance has become less acute. For everyone, the taking down of the Berlin Wall symbolised a return to Europe. But the speed at which the matter of German reunification came to the forefront has already caused a revival of old fears in the East, especially in Poland. The fallout is significant even for those not directly involved, as noted by Janos Kis, head of the Alliance of Free Democrats, in Budapest: “German reunification means that we can change those borders we inherited at the end of the last war and which are unjust. Now the overwhelming majority of Hungarians consider illegitimate the present borders of Hungary, established by the Versailles and Trianon Treaties and reaffirmed after World War II. The immediate consequence of reunification would be the opening of debate on Transylvania. Moreover, this is exactly what the President of our Parliament, Matyas Szuros, has just done, demanding autonomous status for Transylvania.” In the hope, one could add, of eventual, reunification. It will be difficult to explain to the Hungarians that inter-German borders are of a different nature from those between Germany and its neighbours. Matters were made no easier by the German refusal, in Helmut Kohl’s 10 point plan, to give any guarantees regarding its eastern borders.

The prospect of a great Germany replacing the USSR economically in Central Eastern Europe is not the problem. As Adam Michnik pointed out at the end of October 1989: "One cannot speak of 'leaving Yalta', of European reunification without accepting German reunification. We Poles have been a divided nation for too long to wish the same thing on others. And yet anti-German sentiment is the last card Jaruzelski holds in order to maintain Poland's anchor in the East."

Nevertheless, the sour notes of Kohl's visit to Poland to discuss the German minority in Silesia, the refusal of any guarantee for the Oder-Neisse border and finally, the rise of xenophobic nationalism—sometimes tinted with Nazism—in the GDR as in the FRG are all factors which modify the situation and risk compromising the progress made over the last twenty years. In an editorial in

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Gazeta on December 7, 1989, Michnik again clarified his thoughts: "Relations with Germany are of prime importance to the future of Europe and that is why present explosions of Polophobia among the Germans do not only threaten Poland, they threaten the democratic order in Europe, and we believe German interests are also included here. We say this today, before it is too late: hatred breeds hatred." And Michnik was led to request the aid of "democratic powers" to counter the most evident anti-Polish manifestations, such as restrictions on the Poles' right to travel to and shop in the GDR. "The Polish people are waiting for you to publicly declare that the Polish-German border on the Oder and Neisse rivers is permanent and inviolable. You have the right to a democratic state and we have the right to secure borders. How do you explain your reserve?"



A difficult disengagement

Michnik's fear is founded in the anticipation of a threat to democratic transition in the whole of Eastern Europe posed by nationalist sentiment. With what can be heard of some aspects within East Germany, one could wonder about what the role of the nationalist right would be in a reunified Germany. Equally, German hesitation over the question of borders risks reinforcing the wave of traditional nationalism in Poland, something the country could well do without. In brief, one inevitable question must be posed as to the future. What impact would the release of so many repressed frustrations have on post-Communist society?

The freezer or purgatory?

Two theses are apparent and applicable. On the one hand, has Eastern Europe passed through an ice age or a long, deep freeze, or on the other hand, has it been through nothing less than purgatory?

The Polish journalist David Warszawski outlines the former as follows: "Communism is a bit like a freezer in which, half a century ago, living people were stored. Normally one would not survive such treatment, but in addition, the freezer broke down! So everything that was put into it fifty years ago comes out in very poor condition. That is why today you will find in Poland a nationalist, authoritarian, extreme Catholic, anti-semitic right wing, a Socialist movement whose references are those adopted by the PPS in Radom in 1937 and a Church which believes itself to be the superior voice of the nation (and which is seen as such by the people)."

This worrying, though not altogether surprising diagnosis could be extended to include all the countries which are in the throes of de-Sovietisation, starting with the republics of the Soviet Union. What prevails in these early stages is the democratic interaction between change on the edges of the Soviet empire (Eastern Europe) and that within the Soviet empire (the Baltic and the Ukraine). Michnik caused an uproar at Kiev when he concluded his speech on the advent of freedom before the Congress of the Popular Front with a very Gaullist "Long live the free Ukraine!" Nevertheless, the same Michnik does not hide his fears regarding what would happen to the shattered empire if the transition to democracy failed: "A blend of nationalism and xenophobia would then be the greatest threat to Eastern Europe. The exit of communism could lead to the creation of authoritarian or fascist regimes feeding on mutual hostilities."

But one should never count on the worst. There is still the second hypothesis, not only more optimistic, but also more in conformity with the present events of the extraordinary "peaceful revolution" in Eastern Europe: that of communism as a form of purgatory, that 40 years' experience of resistance to communism has been a real schooling in the art of democracy, the only experience capable, in the final analysis, of integrating nationalist currents. The experience of the battle for human rights, that of Solidarity in Poland, that of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia or that of the democratic opposition in Hungary have reinforced the attachment to pluralism in these countries and have allowed the weaving of new links between nations once separated by both their past and by the Communist regime. Intellectuals are today sobering up after two major hangovers, that of nationalism of which they were the inventors in the nineteenth century, and that of communism, to which many identified in order to escape disillusionment with nationalism. Today, as in 1848 or 1918, they have considerable responsibility with regard to the blend of these old and new characteristics in the formation of political cultures in Eastern Europe. (It being understood that those cultures that are the most resistant to totalitarianism are not necessarily those that are the most suited to a transition to democracy. In this, the blend of Polish nationalism and Catholicism contrasts with Czechoslovak Masarykian social democracy.)

Adherents to the purgatory hypothesis show that societies in the East today are radically different to those of the period before the advent of communism and are right to insist that like the events of 1848 or 1918, the "peaceful revolution" of 1989 and democracy integrate legitimate national aspirations.

Adherents to the freezer thesis fear that, without integration with Western Europe, the risks of a drift towards nationalist populism in the East are very real, to such an extent that some in the West have already begun to regret the disappearance of the imperial certitudes of yesteryear, and to cite the famous poem written by the Greek Constanine Cavafy in 1904: "And now what will become of us without the barbarians? Despite everything, they supplied us with a solution".