Central Europe between the West and East: Independent Region, the Bridge, Buffer Zone or 'eternal' Semi-Periphery?[1]

LADISLAV CABADA

sciendo

Politics in Central Europe (ISSN: 1801-3422)
Vol. 16, No. 2
DOI: 10.2478/pce-2020-0018

Abstract: *The development of new East-Central European (ECE) democracies after 1989 might be separated into two different parts regarding the external, but in many ways also the internal evaluation. While the first fifteen years, crowned the 'big bang' EU-enlargement in 2004, might be evaluated generally as a successful story of socialisation into the Western structures, i.e. democratisation and Europeanisation, the next fifteen years are often evaluated as the period of getting sober. Paradoxically, instead of a continuation of the Europeanisation of values, memory and identity in many ECE nations we can observe the strengthening of anti-EU and anti-European attitudes. As Ágh stressed in his latest works, as early as the 2008 financial crisis outbreak we have had to deal with the polycrisis situation accompanied with de-Europeanisation, failure in the catching up process, the strengthening of the Core-Periphery divide in the EU/Europe and the decline of democracy in East-Central Europe. Even the migration crisis in 2015 and beyond strengthened the mental gaps between so-called 'old' and 'new' Europe. In the article I focus on reasons for the semi-peripheral position of ECE, long durée processes in the creation of European macro-regions, and specific features of ECE nations' identity. I reject the black-and-white division of Europe into two regions, stressing the positive examples from ECE as well as many problems of democratic governance the EU – including the 'West' – faces.*

Keywords: ***East-Central Europe; macro-regions; identity; history; legacy; modernity***

1 This article is the result of Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 74-01 "Political Sciences, Culture, Language" (2020) based on a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-term Strategic Development of Research. Some ideas presented in this article were already presented in my previous work (Cabada 2019) and are distinctively developed in the upcoming book chapter (Cabada 2020).

Introduction

The development of new East-Central European (ECE) democracies after 1989 might be differentiated into at least two periods. While the first fifteen years, finalised with the NATO and EU-membership, might be evaluated as the successful story of socialisation into the Western structures, the next fifteen years are often evaluated as the period of de-democratisation, de-Europeanisation, or democratic backsliding. Many scholars are convinced, yet, that the group of new democracies in ECE did not internalise the same characteristics and values as the European 'West' and/or that the ECE nations even decided to abandon the EU's mainstream and create a mind-different region (cf. Ágh 2019a; Ágh 2019b; Ágh 2020; Cabada 2019; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Ther 2015; Wiatr 2020). Paradoxically, instead of continuing a Europeanisation of values, memory, and identity in many East-Central European nations we observe a strengthening of anti-EU and anti-European attitudes. As the Hungarian political scientist A. Ágh (cf. Ágh 2019a; Ágh 2019b; Ágh 2020) stressed in his latest works, as early as the 2008 financial crisis outbreak we have had to deal with the polycrisis situation accompanied with de-Europeanisation, failure in the catching up process, a strengthening of the core-periphery divide in the EU/Europe, and a decline in democracy in East-Central Europe. Even the migration crisis in 2015 and beyond strengthened the mental gaps between so-called 'old' and 'new' Europe within the New World Order (Ágh 2019a) and "by its explosive nature it generated an atmosphere of mass alarm and thereby hurled into the political arena an emotional wave of patriotism, nationalism and xenophobia" (Klíma 2020: 152).

In the last decade, not only in ECE, but in several political parties and social groups in so called 'Old Europe', we observe demands for 'another Europe' – traditional, more authoritarian, and with a clear preference for national identity and specific solutions. These voices are calling again for Europe as a fortress. A new danger might be located beyond the European borders and these voices are calling again for Europe as a fortress. Many ECE politicians promptly and effectively used this issue, and stress the jeopardy that the politicians from 'Brussels' (equalised with the 'liberal' EU's West or core) do not seriously reflect such danger. Such behaviour should be further evidence of ECE's disinterest or ignorance, including the (great) power and/or colonial attributes (e.g. lack of discussion, one-sided decisions, relocation quotas). For the ECE populists this is development of new evidence of double standards and the unequal position of the EU's East *vis-á-vis* the West. Namely, that ECE should again be the object of history and great power politics, the instrument or victim of West European interests.

In my short essay, structured more as a set of short contemplations, I will reflect the main issues we observe in the contemporary EU-architecture with a specific focus on ECE and the Visegrad Group as the 'core' of this region. One

of my main goals is to falsify this black-and-white narrative about the 'Good West' and the 'Bad East' and reflect the challenges we face in ECE as the general European/Western problem. I will also ask for the reasons for the continued or newly established dividing lines and dissimilarities between or among the European macro-regions. Again, I anticipate that the internal slashes and differences rooted in competing political cultures and value sets might be detected not only in the new EU-member states, but in ECE they evince more distinctive intensity.

East(-Central) Europe as the (semi-)periphery

Analysing the history of ECE, we will find above all the history of uncertainty and insecurity. Since the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we observe the periods of upswing and boom in the region repeatedly, but such success usually remained limited to small urbanised areas and population groups. For long centuries closing the gap on the West – or catching-up, as we often label the development after 1989 – became the most important narrative. In the 19th century, Germany challenged France as the new/alternative role model of the rapidly modernising nation. All the more was the disappointment of the ECE nations when this civilisational mission was transformed into colonial takeover. Also, this disappointment probably produced the situation in which some of these nations directed their hopes towards another external great power: Russia/USSR. The behaviour of both nations – Russia and Germany – but maybe also the geopolitically-rooted activities of other European powers (France, Italy) led the East-Central European nations towards a specific victim-syndrome and inferiority complex. In my opinion, this syndrome still presents an important part of the collective mentality in the East-Central Europe region. Not only because of Yalta-syndrome and the great power division of post-WWII Europe, but in individual cases because of many other 'separate' betrayals such as 'Trianon', 'Munich', 'Ribbentrop-Molotov' etc., the ECE nations internalised the conviction that they might be as well developed as the West, but were repeatedly betrayed, abandoned, occupied and exploited.

As the result of such narratives we observe the mixture of admiration, envy and hate towards the West that is embedded in the centre–periphery opposite. Many ECE nations developed in the modern times into underdeveloped peripheries. 'In consequence, the national movements in these countries articulated the national identity rather as the mobilization of the tradition and primordial community against the threats of modernity. The definition of national identity occurred parallelly with the cleavage between the tradition and modernity. As the result, such cleavage became even more distinctive… The importance of the cleavage between the modernization and traditionalism, between the Westernization and protection of the autochthonous national culture corresponds with the way how is the European identity constructed and required' (Brusis 2003: 261).

In ECE, a strong tradition of positive auto stereotypes has developed in the past, which means that ECE nations often consider themselves morally better than those in other European regions – the East and also the West. Let me acknowledge at this point the disappointment of Milan Kundera or Václav Havel from the consumptive and intellectually declining West and their conviction that Central Europe specifically might play a positive role in European revitalisation. Nowadays, the nativist and populist leaders in the region follow in stressing the difference of ECE, while also stressing other legacies and mental backgrounds.

The fear from the negative influence of external powers, making ECE rather passive subjects of political development, brought the thinkers and politicians in the region to the attempts to prevent such external influence with integration and cooperation. Until 1918 the Habsburg Empire tried to play such a role, but as early as 1867 it was clear that the ethnonational powers were stronger than the integrative one. After WWI many integrative ideas and projects were proposed. These included the imperial project of *Intermarium* with Poland in the leading role, Masaryk's idea of *the Europe in-between* created as a belt of small nations from Finland to Greece, as well as many externally based projects (with France, Italy or Nazi Germany in the leading role). All these projects had already collapsed before the beginning of WWII.

During the EU-enlargement process ECE was usually prepared to develop regional cooperation only within the EU's framework, i.e. to abandon the position of European (semi-)periphery and join the European 'core'. Nevertheless, in the recent period we observe important changes. The regional cooperation in ECE is presented and understood as the opposition and alternative towards the EU, or better said the EU-mainstream. Why do we have to deal with the situation of important differences between the European 'West' and 'East'? Is this difference 'real' or rather the constructed media-picture and public discourse? In my opinion, the main reason lies in deformed modernity in ECE as well as in many historical turns that complicate the long-term stabilisation of values and identity.

Deformed modernity as the challenge for the ECE region and Europe

The backwardness and modernisation gap compared with the European West is not only related to the Communist legacy in ECE. On the contrary, since the Early Middle Ages the areas eastwards from the Elbe river were understood as the less developed European regions striving to catch up with the West. The modernity commencement in the 19th century presented a new form of this old challenge. The response given by the Habsburg court and the reformulated national societies was colourful and in many ways contradictory.

P. Wandycz (1992: 3–12) stresses that Central Europe, religiously and culturally belonging to the West, was ascribed to the East, regarding economic, tech-

nological and general civilisation development. Indeed, the border between the West and the East was not very clear in Central Europe; as the most important reason he mentions the unclearness of this border within *Germania* and later Germany. Last but not least he stresses the relatively low population density in ECE. In his opinion all of this made this region the European semi-periphery with visible internal differences – Bohemia was situated close to the centre while the eastern Polish or Hungarian provinces presented the periphery.

Similarly, many other scholars and observers stress the development/modernity issue regarding the formation and identity of different European regions. H. von Hofmannsthal labelled the population of the Habsburg monarchy as 'semi-European and semi-Asian nations' (Kożuchowski 2013: 86). A similar position we can observe in the concept of *Ruritania* presented at the end of the 19th century by the British writer Anthony Hope. *Ruritania* is a German-speaking, Catholic land in Central Europe, the absolute monarchy containing deep social conflicts. The most important tension exists between the (almost) western urban elites and the rural ethnics settled at the (semi-)peripheries. Hope's book presents the persiflage of the 'exotic Central Europe that bordered the Balkans and was populated by wolves, Count Dracula, Gypsies, illiterate peasants, orthodox Jews, and notorious Polish and Hungarian nobles' (Kożuchowski 2013: 177). Similarly, E. Gellner presents the Habsburg monarchy as the epicentre of the decisive modernisation conflict between the cosmopolite liberals ('the Viennese') and the representatives of the 'post-feudal obscurantism and authoritarianism' (Gellner 1998: 32–33). And today, Ágh (2019: 40) aptly mentioned that the 'Central European region has produced well-developed "European" cities and an "Asian" backward countryside, being two worlds apart with different worldviews' (cf. also Ther 2015).

During the 19th century, the initial idea of shared Austrian transnational/state identity within the Habsburg Empire was deconstructed not only because of nationalist movements, but also regarding the different approaches towards the modernity challenges. An extremely poisoned mixture presented the combination of both approaches, equalising the modernity or traditionalism with the entire nations or ethnic groups. The traditional prejudice against the *Ostleute*, originating in the great European narrative of the reconciliation of the old Latin--German world with the new European World of Slavs in the 8th and 9th centuries was transformed within Austria and such prejudice was used by the pan-Germans (perceiving themselves as the group that has to modernise the other ethnical groups –– maybe with the exception of the Hungarians) as well as other liberal--national movements. In this sense, the German-speaking, as well as the Czech, Slovenian or Hungarian liberal-national intellectual perceived themselves as fighters against the anti-modern actors (Kożuchowski 2013: 86–87). In the period between the great wars, such prejudices and distinguishing of nations was very strong and often became part of national myths. Beneš labelled Poland and

Hungary as 'feudal nations', Masaryk proclaimed the process of de-Austricisation, Hungarian, Polish or Slovenian conservative leaders often labelled Masarykian democracy as depraved and equalised liberalism with Communism, etc. Also, during the Communist period these prejudices were protected in popular tradition and after 1989 they again became an important part of public discourse. On one hand, we can mention the 'separation' and auto-stereotype of Austria towards ECE; on the other the internal divisions within the post-Communist area. One of the most visible is the self-evaluation of the Visegrad Group as the nations that dispose of better preconditions for EU-membership than the other post-Communist states (Cabada – Walsch 2017: 41–47).

For sure, historical experience and historical prejudice on both sides of the former Iron Curtain played an important role in such an optimistic vision. A quintessential example reflected from inside as well as by external actors is that the Visegrad Group were the group of nations disposed for faster democratisation and Westernisation than the other ECE nations. An important reason for such an auto- and a hetero-perspective were the intellectual debates that took place from the 1960s to the 1980s (and also beyond), in which intellectuals such as Havel, Kundera, Konrád, Michnik and Vodopivec played important roles in portraying Central Europe as 'kidnapped' West. Maybe we should also search here for the reasons for the 'disappointment' in the development in ECE, as far as the clearly privileged nations are at the moment judged as the biggest 'trouble makers'.

All of the above-mentioned stresses that the Communist legacy is an important shared feature of ECE nations, but that many important legacies are rooted in older periods. L. Rensmann (2012) stresses the salient counter-cosmopolitan preferences, A. Pirro (2014) clericalism, social national economics and anti-Communism (which was and is often equalised with liberalism). In the scientific analysis and debate we cannot fully accept the 'regional holism', before we point out important distinctions. Among the most important distinctions are that in the late 1990s Slovenia and Estonia might be listed – Slovenia as a Euro-optimistic society hoping to merge with the EU-core (Cabada – Waisová 2010); Estonia then with the tendency to 'abandon' the ECE and join the European North (Cabada 2020).

Nevertheless, it was also clear that the post-Communist reality and legacy is unique. In 2003, shortly before the EU-enlargement, M. Brusis (2003: 259) wrote: 'From the EU perspective the candidate states evince much more common characteristics as some candidate states and the EU-member states or nations from other East European regions'. Z. Krasnodębski highlights the complicated reversal in the utopic models in ECE's societies – from the Communist utopia the region jumped directly into the Kantian utopia of European identity and civil society. Thus, we observe in ECE 'the hopes (but also fear) in three differently undergoing processes occurring within the EU – the globalization, Europeanization and Regionalization' (Orłowski 2003).

Describing the societies in ECE countries before 1989, P. Sztompka (1993) uses the term *fake modernity*. He places 'deformed modernity' in contrast with the 'authentic modernity' in Western societies. Similarly, I. Bernik (1997) describes the (post-)Communist societies as 'sub-modern'. In his opinion, we have to deal with the societies that underwent partial modernisation during the Communist period, but also preserved important parts of traditional political institutions. The most important particularity of the Communist states is the top-down modernisation, the dictate of modernist intellectual and partly also political elites (Bernik 2000). As Ágh (2019: 6) summarised, ECE as a historical periphery, dependent on the development in the West and East and mobbing historically in cycles of Westernisation and Easternisation occurs in a state of permanent semi-modernisation.

Asymmetry between the European macro-regions

Returning to the victim-paradigm strongly influencing the internal political and societal discourse in ECE, we can also better understand how – based on this paradigm – the EU perceived it. Before the revolution, ECE states were fully subordinated to Soviet interests, and they are often convinced of a similar subordination and/or unequal position within the EU. We can mention a plethora of political decisions or political behaviour examples, such as the unilateral decisions of Germany in the refugee crisis, or decisions on the *Energiewende*, including an important energy security dimension – the gas pipelines Nord Stream I and II between Russia and Germany, which passes by the ECE and which is strongly criticised in the region. Similarly we can mention the dismissive behaviour of French presidents towards the ECE – J. Chirac criticised the ECE politicians in February 2003 for their positive reflection on the US Iraqi invasion with the famous sentence *They missed a good opportunity to shut up*; Nicolas Sarkozy repeatedly questioned the upcoming Czech EU-Presidency in the second half of 2008 and even ignored it during the new round of the Near East crisis in January 2009; Emanuel Macron repeatedly uses the phrase about the 'wall between the old and new EU-member states'. Co-responsible for such feelings of inequality – and let us stress that feelings are an important part of politics and strongly influence the discourse – is the incorrect rhetoric of some EU-representatives. For example, Jean-Claude Juncker greeted the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the EU-Summit in Riga in May 2015 with the words *Servus, Diktator*. Let us stress that such words and paroles are presented from institutions that in other cases rank political correctness as one of most important European values.

P. Ther describes the 'obvious asymmetry between the West and East Europe' (Ther 2015: 229). The West reflected the enlargement issue timidly and many steps of EU-15 towards the ECE nations strongly violated one of the basic European values – equality. It is not only the issue of fear of uncontrolled immigra-

tion from ECE and the transition periods implemented in many EU-15 states. As Fehr stresses the issue was much more complex. The EU-15 fear was connected with three factors: 'insufficient participation in the revolution from 1989, fear from the concurrence at the labour market, and fear to share the own welfare with new members' (Ther 2015: 330).

The West European political elites tried to avert the negative, above all, economic effects of East-enlargement, unfortunately based on unequal treatment of which a typical example is agrarian subventions. 'Instead of essential reform of this policy (that failed primarily because of French agrarian lobby) could the farmers in new EU-member states, compared with the West, use only small piece of these subventions… Such unequal treatment left a bad taste' (Ther 2015: 331). Among the newest examples of double-standards we might mention the double-standards of eatables, playing an important role in domestic debate and electoral campaigns in the Czech Republic and Poland.

On the other hand, we have to stress that the populist anti-EU rhetoric in many ECE countries is often incorrect. Popular became the equalisation of the EU with the USSR (V. Klaus, V. Orbán, J. Kaczyński; cf. Fehr 2016: 68). Nevertheless, I find much more problematic the anti-modern rhetoric often produced by Hungarian, Polish or Croatian politicians enjoying the decisive support of strong societal groups. H. Fehr refers again to the anti-modern nature of these political actors. The populist movement parties instrumentalise the problems related to coping with history and use it in the struggle for cultural sovereignty and dominance (Fehr 2017: 1). The anti-modern positions and statements from ECE populists are directed against 'liberal scholars, "foreign" politicians, a secular way of life imported from West Europe'. We can observe the specific appeal to 'normality' – 'traditions, historical awareness, patriotism, trust in God, the normal family life between man and woman' (Fehr 2016: 141). Fehr calls such an anti-modern position as 'plebeianism' making an appeal 'above all on the way of life of former rurally shaped masses'. Strengthening and generalising the argument, Fehr quotes the parole of Viktor Orbán from 2014 about Hungary: 'We are the rurally shaped nation' (Fehr 2016: 148).

The mobilisation patterns are rooted in a permanent search for enemies. Among the most popular enemies belong the minorities, neighbours, Great Powers (including the European Union and Germany), cosmopolites, liberals, Jews, George Soros etc. 'The label "liberal" in Hungary became a synonym for "alienated" and the liberal camp as the group that harm Hungary in command of "foreign interests". "Liberal" is used as the term for "collaboration". In Poland Jaroslaw Kaczyński and other members of PiS prefer the terms "false elite" and "rabble liberalism" in the polemic with their political opponents, especially against the critical publicists and cultural counter-elites' (Fehr 2017: 10).

As Ágh (2019: 146–147) notes, we are living in the Orwellian world where 'we, Central Europeans represent genuine Europeanness against the declining West'

and 'the honest new domestic elites protect the European population against external and internal enemies instead of the impotent and parasitic Brussels elite'. Naturally, above all the situation in Poland after October 2015, many problematic steps of the Hungarian government and Prime Minister Orbán and the weak state in Romania seem to confirm the doubts in ECE positive development in this region. We can also mention many other problematic tendencies, issues and actors, such as anti-liberal tendencies in Croatia, visible populist politicians such as B. Borisov, R. Fico, J. Janša, V. Ponta or M. Zeman or the danger of state capture in the Czech Republic after 2017 with the Oligarch A. Babiš as the Prime Minister (Klíma 2020; Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley, eds. 2019).

On the other hand, we have to stress again that different problematic issues and manifestations in the politics of ECE nations could be at least partially observed in the old EU-member states (Liebhart 2020). Mediocracy came with S. Berlusconi to the EU and the personalisation of politics including the populist rhetoric we must not associate only with radical or even extremist politicians such as U. Bossi, the Le Pen family or P. Fortuyn, but also with the mainstream politicians such as T. Blair, G. Schröder, N. Sarkozy from the past (Cabada – Tomšič 2016), or B. Johnson, S. Kurtz or the still growing group of leading Italian populist politicians; D. Trump presents probably the worst example of the combination of populist and nativist rhetoric and personalised politics. The political parties and party systems in ECE are often evaluated as unstable. Nevertheless, very visible marks of important changes towards instability can also be found in Greece, Spain, France, Austria or Germany. Additionally, the radicalisation of important and big societal groups might be observed not only in ECE, but also in many nations usually understood and presented as stable Western democracies – next to Italy we can mention the stable position of *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, as well as the successes of the French National Front, G. Wilders or the True Finns (Cabada 2019).

There exist many examples of promising consolidation of democracy, Europeanisation and socialisation in ECE. Many ECE nations fulfilled very strict preconditions and adopted the Euro-currency, many demonstrated fiscal responsibility and (re)established stable economies after long decades of Communist devastation. The unemployment rates in many ECE states is considerably under the EU-average, and many governments from ECE have already successfully experienced the EU-Presidency tasks. But all of this had already happened before we witnessed the building of 'illiberal democracies in Hungary and Poland, following the national populism from the period between the wars' (Fehr 2016: 7). In this sense Ágh's scepticism is understandable, especially if we consider that two states where the transition started primarily – Poland and Hungary – 'have changed from promising models of liberal democracy into illiberal, conspiracy-minded majoritarian regimes' (Krastev 2019).

Nevertheless, we have to distinguish not only in Europe (macro-regions, ideal types of political culture), but also within the ECE. In my opinion the

lamentation that 'ECE democracy finally collapsed in the 2010s' does not distinguish the very problematic cases such as Hungary from the still promising and stable cases (Estonia, Slovenia and in many ways also Slovakia) and the group of ECE nations 'in between'. I definitely do not accept a simple presentation of politicians such as J. Kaczyński as a sociotype of an ECE-politician, as we can observe in the Western mainstream media. Such labelling of politics in ECE is completely incorrect regarding any democratic political actors in the region.

The EU's socialisation role nowadays is even more important than fifteen (and more) years ago, but must not be utilised as one of the conditionality components. The ECE nations must enjoy the full rights of EU-membership. If not, the wall will be constructed between the new and old member states. West Europe also has to accept the matter of fact that the European identity is much more complicated with the new member states and that the EU is not an identical institution to Europe. Brusis differentiates between two ideal and typical relationships between the EU-member identity and European identity, and two concepts of 'Europeanness' – synonymic and synecdochical. The synonymic concept presents the EU and EU-membership as the only possible way the nation and society can partake in the European identity. The synecdochical concept understands the European identity as something that must not necessarily be developed and constructed within the EU. During the process of approaching the EU the synonymic concept was usually accepted, naturally also for the pragmatic reasons: 'The internal vagueness in mutual relation of both identity definitions allowed the internal critics of East enlargement to use the synonymic relation, while they in the reality preferred the synecdochical relation' (Brusis 2003: 268).

In other words, the opinion of the EU-15 that the candidate states must fully adapt in all spheres to become European, was accepted in the group of candidates for a simple reason – to reach EU-membership. Once the nation entered the EU, the balancing process between the both ideal typical positions started: 'The EU-membership is strongly singled out from the Europeanness and the definition of European identity' (Brusis 2003: 25). Such changes happen partly also because the new member states face a system of exceptions and softened rules, mostly regarding the old member states. Important examples include the issue of a common European currency and the position of the United Kingdom and Denmark compared with the ECE states, the violation of fiscal rules not only in the case of Greece, but also by other nations including Germany, Italy and France, the *opt-outs* etc.

Shortly before the EU-enlargement in 2004, Brusis stressed that all Auto- and Hetero-stereotypes regarding the East–West cleavage still survive in Europe and were re-formulated regarding the conditions where the modernisation narrative was transformed into Europeanisation. Again, he observes two important – and completely different – antipodes, namely the liberal modernists supporting Eu-

ropeanisation as the last phase of Westernisation, and the traditionalist stressing the need to protect the autochthonous national cultures (Brusis 2003: 261). Again, such evaluation presents East-Central Europe as the transitive region between the West and East and – as the nations defined themselves after joining the EU – also the role model and 'bridge' between the West and the remaining candidates from the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

From 'last bastion of Europe' again 'back to Europe'

Polish, Hungarian and Croatian politics and historiography often stresses the important role of these nations in protecting Europe against non-European invaders (Russians/Soviets, Ottomans). When we observe the contemporary discourse in ECE, this historical role is often stressed and combined with the criticism towards the 'ultraliberal' Western Europe/EU and presented as 'overall disillusionment with European values' (Aleksić 2013: 70). This brings us back to the Ruritania concept and the conflict of two different cultures and societal groups in the region(s). In my opinion, ECE has the tendency to accept only the 'technical' part of modernisation (industrialisation, welfare), but not the 'ideological' – the liberal democracy. The proponents of such limited modernisation often stress that ECE evince better characteristics and is morally superior in the comparison with the West. As Ágh (2019: 142) mentions, the loser-nation syndrome was reinforced in the last decade and supplemented with the mythicisation of the 'golden age' of national history as the 'glorious past that never was'.

Expectations that only part of the Western/European modernisation style might be implemented into ECE presents the agenda of national-conservative actors in the region and also brings them closer to the extra-European actors such as Russian leader V. Putin and Turkish President R.T. Erdogan. In the perspective of V. Orbán or L. Kyczyński, ECE presents itself (again) the protector of Europe, this time against the West European nations that are supposedly abandoning 'European values'.

In the last two centuries, the ECE has gone thorough innumerable changes regarding the polity construction, demographic structure and depopulation/repopulation fluidity (Bianchini 2017: 39) and socio-economic conditions. Naturally, all of these changes also presented a permanent challenge for the identity discussion. 'Under the framework of the time-space compression characteristic of modern times, the relationship between political systems, state borders, identities and security has taken on a new appearance, particularly for the people living in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans during the arch of the twentieth century' (Bianchini 2017: 1–3). As Bianchini stresses, to belong to the European East means to experience the 'permanent' insecurity given by geographical proximity. To escape such pressure means joining the West (or the North, as Wæver proposes for the Baltic part of East-Central Europe; Wæver

1992). Such opportunity is especially interconnected with Central Europe as semi-periphery, while Eastern Europe and the Balkans as the peripheries usually do not have such opportunity.

Small Central European countries, 'although many of them were packed in the Habsburg empire for several centuries, suffered from the pressures of Western modernised and industrialised states on one side and the Eastern empires (Russian and Ottoman) on the other. They have been swinging through history between long waves of Westernisation and Easternisation' (Ágh 1991: 84–85). The 'year of miracles', 1989, opened again the perspective of Westernisation before these nations. Many of these nations used this new opportunity window and overcame the unfavourable geographical proximity and unfinished modernity. Despite the fact that some important actors in ECE still prefer the posture of 'proud periphery' before the Westernisation in the sense of modernisation and liberalisation, I am convinced that ECE as a region continually progresses towards full inclusion into Europe. Nevertheless, for such inclusion West Europe is necessary as a partner and not (only) as a mentor. Furthermore, the real menace for the democracy consolidation in ECE demonstrates not only the democratic decline in the region, but also the possible de-democratisation in the (European) West. In this sense, West Europe must reflect the processes of democracy de-consolidation in some ECE nations as its own distorted mirror. In this sense, the real democrats in both European macro-regions face the same challenge.

References

Ágh, A. (1991): After the Revolution: A Return to Europe. In *Towards a Future European Peace Order?,* edited by K.E. Birnbaum, J.B. Binter and S.K. Badzik, London: Pinter, 83–97.

Ágh, A. (2019): *Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe. The Divide in the EU and Emerging Hard Populism.* Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Ágh, A. (2019b): The neoliberal hybrid in East-Central Europe. The 'treason of intellectuals' and its current re-assessment. *Politics in Central Europe*, 15 (3): 355–381. Doi 10.2478/pce-2019-0021.

Ágh, A. (2020): Rethinking the historical trajectory of ECE: From the "original sin" in democratization to redemocratization. *Politics in Central Europe*, 16(2). Doi 10.2478/pce-2020-0017.

Aleksić, T. (2013): *The Sacrificed Body. Balkan Community Building and the Fear of Freedom*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Bernik, I. (1997): *Dvojno odčaranje politike*. Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences.

Bernik, I. (2000): *Political Culture in Post-socialist Transition. Radical Cultural Change or Adaptation on the Basis of Old Cultural Patterns?* Frankfurt/Oder.

Bianchini, S. (2017): *Liquid Nationalism and State Partitions in Europe*. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Brusis, M. (2003): Zwischen europäischer und nationaler Identität – Zum Diskurs über die Osterweiterung der EU. In *Europäische Öffentlichkeit – Bürgergesellschaft – Demokratie.* Ansgar Klein: Opladen, 255–272.

Cabada, L. (2019): Ein Europa oder mehrere? Ostmitteleuropa auf der Suche nach den (europäischen) Werten. In: P. Nitschke (ed.), *Gemeinsame Werte in Europa? Stärken und Schwächen im normativen Selbstverständnis der Europäischen Integration.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 29–50.

Cabada, L. (2020): East-Central Europe searching for (European) values. How to be more than the 'proud periphery'?, In T. Kavaliauskas (ed.), *Europe Thirty Years After 1989: Transformations of Values, Memory and Identity.* Leiden: Brill (in print).

Cabada, Ladislav – Tomšič, Matevž (2016): The Rise of Person-based Politics in the New Democracies – The Czech Republic and Slovenia. In: *Politics in Central Europe* 12 (2): 29–50.

Cabada, L. – Waisová, Š. (2010): Slovenia as an EU-member – a Euroenthusiastic Society and Political Elite. In P. Drulák and Z. Šabič, eds., *The Czech and EU Presidencies in a Comparative Perspective*. Dordrecht: Republic of Letters, 37–54.

Cabada, L. – Walsch, Ch. (2017): *Od Dunajské federace k Visegrádu… a zpět? Tradiční a nové formáty středoevropské spolupráce*. Prague: Libri and MUP Press.

Cianetti, L. – Dawson, J. – Hanley, S. (eds.) (2019): *Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe.* London and New York: Routledge.

Fehr, H. (2016): *Vergeltende Gerechtigkeit – Populismus und Vergangenheitspolitik nach 1989.* Opladen, Berlin and Toronto: B. Budrich Verlag.

Fehr, H. (2017): Populismus und Aufarbeitung des Kommunismus in Europa. *Erinnern, 2017/1*, Rundbrief der Stiftung Gedenkstätten Sachsen-Anhalt.

Gellner, E. (1998): *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klíma, M. (2020): *Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe. Political Parties, Clientelism and State Capture.* London and New York: Routledge.

Kożuchowski, A. (2013): *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary. The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in the Interwar Europe*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Krastev, I. (2019): The metamorphosis of Central Europe. *Project Syndicate,* 21 January 2019, available at https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-metamorphosis-of-central-europe-by-ivan-krastev-2019-01?barrier=accesspaylog (30 June 2020).

Krastev, I. – Holmes, S. (2019): *The Light That Failed: A Reckonking.* Allan Lane.

Liebhart, K. (2020): 25 years later – Austria's shift to the populist right: national characteristics of a pan-European trend. *Politics in Central Europe*, 16(2). Doi: 10.2478/pce-2020-0024.

Orłowski, H. (2003): Literatur und nationale Identität (heute). *Brücke zu einem vereinten Europa. Literatur, Werte und Europäische Identität*. edited B. Lermen and M. Tvrdík, eds. Prague: Konrad-Adenauer_Stiftung, 51–80.

Pirro, Andrea L.P. (2014): Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe. *Government and Opposition* 49 (4): 599–628.

Rensmann, L. (2012): Volatile Counter-Cosmopolitans: Explaining the Electoral Performance of Radical Right Parties in Poland and Eastern Germany. *German Politics & Society* 30 (3): 64–102.

Sztompka, P. (1993): Civilisational Incompetence – The Trap of Post-communist Societies. In: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22 (2): 85–95.

Ther, Philipp. (2015): *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europas, 3. Auflage*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Wæver, O. (1992): Nordic Nostalgia: Northern Europe after the Cold War. *International Affairs* 68 (1): 77–102.

Wandycz, P. S. (1992): *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the present*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wiatr, J.J. (2020): The Crisis of Democracy: An East-Central European Perspective. *Politics in Central Europe*, 16(2). Doi 10.2478/pce-2020-0016.

Ladislav Cabada *is Associated Professor in political science at Department of Political Science and Humanities of the Metropolitan University Prague. At this academic institution he also works as the Vice-Rector for the Research, Quality and Development. Next to this, between February and July 2020 he was also Visiting Research Fellow at the Andrássy Universität Budapest with the support of Pallas Athéné Domus Educationis Foundation. In 2005 he co-founded the international scientific review Politics in Central Europe and has been working as the editor of this journal. In 2006–2012 he served as the Chair of Czech Political Science Association, in 2012–2018 was the President of Central European Political Science Association. He focuses mainly on comparative politics of East Central Europe, regionalism and development studies, Europeanisation, Euroscepticism and political anthropology. E-mail: ladislav.cabada@mup.cz.*