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Nice One, Václav Havel!
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THE FUTURE OF THE V4 – TWENTY YEARS ON

ESSAY: Lajos Parti Nagy on Jindřich Štreit
The International Visegrad Fund supports the development of civil society and contacts among people in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and in the neighborhood—mainly the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. In its annual deadlines, the Fund operates several grant programs, individual scholarship and fellowship programs and individual and group artist residencies. By the end of 2011 the Fund had approved more than 3,100 grant projects and 1,200 individual mobility projects in the total sum of nearly €39 million. The Fund’s annual budget of €7 million consists of equal contributions from the V4 governments.
VISEGRAD INSIGHT

1|2012

CIRCULATION: 4000
FREQUENCY: twice a year

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PUBLISHED BY
Fundacja Res Publica im. H. Krzeczakowskiego
ul. Gałczyńskiego 5, 00-362 Warsaw, Poland
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This issue is free of charge. Postage charge may apply

WEBSITE
www.visegradinsight.eu

ON THE COVER
Vaclav Havel holds a press conference in occasion of the 20th anniversary of the changes in Czechoslovakia and the fall of the Iron Curtain in Prague, Czech Republic, Thursday, Oct. 15, 2009. (AP Photo / Fotolink / Petr David Josek)

We kindly thank researchers working for this issue: Piotr Kątński, Aleksandra Najberek, Iryna Oleksyuk, Agnieszka Zarzyńska.

Visegrad Insight is published by Res Publica Foundation with the kind support of the International Visegrad Fund. The magazine maintains full editorial independence and opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily have to reflect or represent official position of the International Visegrad Fund, the Visegrad Group or the publisher.

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Visegrad Fund
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THE V4 GROUP HAS BEEN PROCLAIMED DEAD SO MANY TIMES THAT WE ARE OFTEN SURPRISED TO FIND IT STILL ALIVE. Built on a long tradition of failures to integrate the kingdoms, provinces and eventually nation states of this region, the Visegrad has proven particularly resistant to Cassandran prophecies. Ironically, Stalin’s motto (stolen from Nietzsche) appears to hold in this periphery of his former empire: what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Forged during the so-called second wave of democratization to strengthen the European integration, Visegrad was instantly consumed by differentiating processes, the most significant symbol of which was the Velvet Divorce of Czechs and Slovaks. Therefore, many proclaimed it dead or incapable: of attaining its goals in its infancy. In the early 1990s, Gyorgy Konrad claimed that the region could never integrate with the rest of the continent, while Adam Michnik described it as an unfulfilled dream of regional sovereignty. A former prime minister from one of the participant countries even called it an “unnecessary experiment”, favoring broader economic cooperation (CEFTA) to institutionalization of the Visegrad Group. Remarkably, these claims were eventually rendered invalid.

First came the integration of the whole region into the economic and security structures of the West. Second, diplomatic practice kept alive channels of consultation, which slowly built confidence in the V4 framework among elites. Then, the International Visegrad Fund became a useful tool for nurturing the dissident dream of Central European civil societies coming together for common goals and reflection. Lastly, the gas crisis of 2009 raised awareness about very pragmatic goals related to energy security in the region and on the continent as a whole. No wonder policymakers became overly enthusiastic, going so far as to propose a military battlegroup unit of the V4 in 2011.

And yet, the region still faces the immense challenge of formulating a shared memory and perspective on shared neighbors. The fabric of pragmatic interest can only hold if it is rooted in a culture of understanding and respect. Even prior to formal cooperation, there have always been different rationales behind visions of “Central Europe”. It was a projection of fallen empires, a dream of Pan-Slavic solidarity and an unrealistic plan to balance military powers encroaching on the East and West. Indeed, Central Europe has often been a concept in service to foreign interests: Mitteleuropa, the satellite states of Stalin and the “New Europe” of Mr. Rumsfeld. These proposals all ended in failure. And even today, a plurality of perspectives on the idea of Central Europe exist, which must be recognized and understood to build a common future. In a variety of possible scenarios, the most obvious purpose of the V4 will be enhancing European integration within the EU and serving as mediator for those behind the paper curtain of Schengen. This requires regional attention and a platform for the discussion of different member’s respective positions.

Visegrad Insight will try to open these and other related questions with analysis and opinion. Led by accomplished editors from the Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), the journal’s aim is to provide a platform for high profile debate on the perspectives and challenges for cooperation between Central European governments, businesses and communities. We want to stimulate discussion and open debate, even to those who don’t favor the V4 framework of cooperation, for readers interested in the current status of the regional that range from economy and politics to culture and society.

Central Europe has historically escaped definitions, and the V4 has not yet been defined. Its institutionalization lies ahead of us and still requires much deliberation. In this territory, the blurred, dimmed and shadowy mist has frequently been the spirit of a region of changing borders, awakened nations and ever-unfinished business. To a stranger or an observer, it might seem impossible to establish any solid political cooperation here. Yet the Visegrad has marked its twentieth anniversary last year, and its prospects are on the rise.

Finally, this project will be a tribute to the heroes of democratic changes in the region, especially those who stood like Václav Havel, in thought and action, at the beginning of the V4 process. But each time we think and write about the future we will address questions and draw attention to the perspectives of new generations, providing them a forum to speak in our inter-generational debates. In this way, global dilemmas will be filtered through regional lenses about the prospects of our fellow citizens in the four Visegrad countries. Join us!

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Editor-in-chief
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After returning from the post of Ambassador of Czechoslovakia, he continued both his political carrier and academic studies, focusing on Slovak-Hungarian relations

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Does the Visegrad Group Make Sense in Today’s Europe?

ONLY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

ALEKSANDER SMOLAR
Polish political scientist, President of the Stefan Batory Foundation.

Let’s take a look at history. The Visegrad cooperation began in 1991, to some extent as a result of considerable pressure from the Western countries, which aimed at strengthening ties between countries of our region. The cooperation happened for two reasons. Firstly, it was meant as a substitute for the European Community. Secondly, the intentions mirrored those which lead the Americans to back the Marshall Plan: to stabilize the region, promote democratic norms and support economic development. The Visegrad relations used to fluctuate, but they were not exceptional. In general, competitiveness and a lack of interest took over shared interests, and it was harsh. It was fuelled by fear of the dominance of the largest country, Poland. The main goal for all the countries was to join the European Union. Upon applying, the leaders believed it would be easier to join the EU without the large and complicated ballast of Poland. Today, purely theoretically, we can admit there are perspectives for a political cooperation. The EU is departing, not to say falling into pieces. We do not know how far this process will go. The Europe that will emerge from this will be an organism of different speeds, lengths, centers or specialized sub-integrations. This seems most probable and realistic.

The assumption that all countries will develop on every level with equal speed has been utopian from the very beginning. Thus, it is impossible for the least developed countries or those manifesting only the slightest intention to further integrate within the EU, to decide about the next steps taken by others. Discrepancies will emerge from a plethora of distinctive qualities – such as the level of economic development, geographical or historical closeness, shared sentiment of own vulnerability or, conversely, similar possibilities. For those very different reasons, the cooperation within the already existing Visegrad Group will certainly be a positive one. We have all seen many initiatives of the Polish government, to name only the struggle to avoid the regulation concerning excessive carbon dioxide emission, which helped to create a coalition of approximately ten countries, not exclusively from the Visegrad Group. It is easy to imagine that the Visegrad Group, thanks to an experience in current cooperation, a geographical closeness and a similar level of the economic development, could possess a greater ability to communicate with and mobilize regions of similar interests, or smaller and larger countries. We are currently witnessing a phase of domination by the largest ones – Germany in agreement with France. Communication amongst smaller and medium-sized countries, and their political struggle to promote their own interests in the framework of the EU, will surely remain a key problem of internal politics of the Visegrad Group. That is why examining this platform of understanding in the search for countries with a common sensibility and shared (at least to some extent) history and interests might appear very useful. In other words, I would consider the Visegrad Four, or any other wider political agreement on a regional level, only in the EU perspective and precisely in its internal politics. However, I am not an enormous optimist.

The history of recent years shows huge discrepancies among countries of the Visegrad Group concerning energy security and attitudes toward Russia. The differences are at least as considerable as among other countries in the European Union. This demonstrates potential obstacles and threats for such cooperation. Visegrad cooperation is not an aim in itself, but a tool for EU members. An external threat lies in weakening or even abandoning it.

The European Union is a specific type of community, where we often hear about how bigger countries reproach smaller ones. Yet it is essentially difficult to find a historical example of such a community, in which the interests of all countries, no matter their size, were taken into account, examples where others would support less powerful countries. If smaller ones are not able to raise their voice and build a coalition to defend their own interests, bigger ones obviously dominate. What is dangerous and, sadly, accurate within the tradition of our region, is a sort of moderate colonization
Is the Dream of Visegrad Dead?

Not exactly a very promising prospect, at least for those who believed that the Visegrad model helped to bring Central European states into the community of Western democracies. To paraphrase the famous words of Lord Ismay, the first secretary general of NATO, Visegrad served the same goals for Central Europe as NATO had for Western Europe: “To keep the Russians out”. Securing the departure of Soviet troops and the abolition of the Warsaw Pact, and keeping “the Americans in” instead of the Germans, helping to stabilize the American presence in Europe by entering NATO. And finally, keeping “the demons of Central Europe” – aggressive nationalist populists – under control.

Is it all over? Not quite, the advocates of the V4 claim. In the past several years, new projects have appeared on the scene: the “Visegrad plus” format, aimed at broadening the horizons and impact of the V4; support of EU’s enlargement, with the focus on Western Balkan countries; and a plan to create a new military battlegroup of the Visegrad Group led by Poland. Moreover, there are still common interests – like energy security; conditions of the next financial framework of the EU after the year 2013; the accent put on a strong and effective cohesion policy primarily focused on the less developed regions of the EU. Visegrad has also served as a plat-
form for consultation not only about common goals, but also about existing differences and problems. However, there are at least five challenges ahead. First, divergent views on the future of the EU and the eurozone: the Poles and the Slovaks are, by and large, in favor of "more Europe", while the Czechs are rather reluctant and the Hungarians are... hard to predict. Secondly, the role of Poland: how to reconcile Poland's aspiration to become a "bigger player" within the EU with its involvement and promotion of the V4? Thirdly, the very delicate issue of Hungary: how long can three partners in the V4 overlook a development so sharply criticized for violations of democracy by international institutions? Fourthly, the new U.S. defense strategy implies a strategic shift away from Europe and a focus on Asia: what does it mean for Central European security? And finally, a very real and dangerous threat is general disillusionment resulting in declining trust in the EU. As Tomas Valasek suggested, in turbulent economic times populations and voters in Europe lose faith in their government's ability to arrest a relentless slide in living standards. As a result, "one cannot rule out the possibility of xenophobic or nationalist regimes coming into power."

We are still happy to have the excellently functioning and efficient International Visegrad Fund, a tangible example of support to various civic, cultural, scientific and educational projects, fostering the civic dimension of cooperation. Its work suggests how important it is to preserve existing ways and tools of cooperation. But will it be enough for the future? /

What Upcoming Challenges Must the V4 Face?

MAGDALÉNA VÁŠÁRYOVÁ
Slovak actress, diplomat and politician. Former Czechoslovak ambassador to Austria and later Slovak ambassador to Poland.

The evaporation of Visegrad cooperation has been predicted by journalists for the past 21 years. But this historically unique cooperation between four countries and nations remains, despite the difficulties it has encountered in this historically volatile region.

Will we be able to strengthen Visegrad cooperation in the future? Do we have the ability to influence the European Union’s politics, especially concerning the forthcoming financial plan for 2014 - 2020 and Eastern Partnership? While our Western partners are very curious whether we will succeed in such tasks, I feel certain that we will. Personally, I would be very pleased to fulfill this task, as it is in the national interest of the Slovak Republic. Since the beginning, V4 cooperation has been a priority of the Slovak foreign policy.

What has strengthened this cooperation in the past and what might undermine it in the future?

On the side of strength, we should mention the departure of the Soviet army from our respective countries, alongside our common withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and COMECON. In addition, I would cite the enormous aid and help of these three states to Slovakia, which temporarily fell out of favor with NATO and the EU in the 90s. Moreover, the activities of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), and finally joint entry into the EU and Schengen space – these are all significant indicators of the strength of this cooperation. But there is an open question hanging somewhere in the future, about whether we can jointly respond to new challenges that face us. First of all, the Slovak Republic will closely monitor the activities of the Polish Republic and the government of Donald Tusk, which has declared its intention to join the common European currency, of which we are members. On the other hand, the appearance of anti-European positions in the official policy of the Czech Republic and Hungary suggests that our joint communication might be disrupted. Furthermore, development will remain an issue inside the EU and EC and is likely to affect neighborhood relations in Central Europe.

Every responsible Central European politician should make support of the V4 a priority. In this traditionally hard-hit region, I believe there will be always a space for those women and men who understand the problems, dangers and realities of our time and who will be politically strong enough to defeat, in an open democratic political struggle, all populist, anti-Europeans and closed-minded people. This is the basis of my genuine optimism for the future of the V4. /
V4 – Let It Rest In Peace

History, geography and economics have overtaken the V4 and their cozy club is looking shabby and out of date. I don’t think it can recover. One reason is size. With a GDP of $470 billion (2010), Poland is bigger than the Czech Republic ($198 billion), Slovakia ($87 billion) and Hungary ($129 billion) combined. That leaves no room for a partnership of equals. Unlike in the era of Lech Kaczyński, Poland’s foreign policy has no room for sentiment, to the East or South. Herding a bunch of small countries with different viewpoints is unattractive when compared to the current policy of dealing with the big ones directly.

No overriding common interest bridges the gap in size. All four countries have gained entry to Schengen, NATO and the European Union. The only other club that matters is the euro: Slovakia is in, but the other three are not. But nothing that happens in Visegrad will ease their paths into the common currency. Their attitude to the new EU treaty also differs: the Poles want in, and the Czechs want out (whereas the Slovaks are in by default, and the Hungarians are struggling to shed their “basket case” label).

Energy security produced a flicker of revival in V4 cooperation some years ago. It is in everyone’s interest to have the north-south gas interconnectors, freeing the four countries from dependence on east-west gas lines run by Russia. But that project is now largely completed. The EU has woken up to the danger of gas dependency on Russia and has pushed through the “unbundling” (liberalization) needed to break Gazprom’s grip. The remaining big headache is that the Baltic States remain an “energy island”—but they are a long way from Visegrad.

Finally, the four countries differ politically. Though the Czechs, Slovaks and Poles will not criticize Viktor Orbán publicly, they dislike his approach as both clumsy and politically costly.

V4 cooperation served its purpose in making Central Europe look, literally, central to the continent’s future. Now it is just another set of meetings, of which there are already too many. Let it rest in peace.

From Poor Neighbors to Partners

At the moment, it seems that the V4 could not be more divergent when it comes to their European stances. Poland is very optimistic and, in a way, a leader of the integration debate, calling for more integration and offering help. Also, the economy seems to be running relatively well, but Poland does not use the euro. Slovakia does use the euro, but is not as willing to contribute when compared to Poland. In this sense, Slovakia is both the most integrated of all the Visegrad countries yet still holding back.

A dark question mark hangs over the Hungarian economy and its politics. As a country that is dependent on international help but has long dragged its feet on reforms, Hungary is now testing the patience of other countries, especially in political terms. The will for integration is verbally strong, but practical political steps and the state of the economy will prevent adoption of the euro in the near future.

The Czech Republic’s economy and politics are respected internationally, but the strong voice of President Klaus against the EU seems to be the loudest in all of the member countries. Although the most economically advanced in the Visegrad neighborhood, politically and rhetorically the Czechs are one of the weakest supporters of further EU integration and euro adoption, although this would likely be in their best interest economically.
Being at the Table, Not on the Menu.
Finding a common negotiation stance would require an exceedingly skilled leader or diplomat, preferably both. Along with a little miracle work, but such things do occasionally happen.

All the same, we are important. The fact that a single veto from any of us could actually block or complicate further integration of the EU is an evident sign that our sovereignty has been strengthened and that we are principal players – such a thing would have been unimaginable twenty years ago.

Naturally, it would be best if we had a common position in the V4, especially one that would be supportive of furthering the EU. In the past twenty years, this project has put us back on our feet. We still have much to gain: namely, a historical chance to shift from the position and mentality of poor neighbors, waiting with an open hand for money, to the position of partners. Partners willing to help and partners willing to contribute – and thus symbolically returning at least a small fraction of all the money that we received in the past years from the EU.

Point of Pride, Turning of the Tide.
In fact, from this vantage point, the help we can now offer should be and perhaps later will be a historical point of national pride – we are affluent enough to help the West. Just think back to twenty years ago, when we were poor and devastated both economically and politically, also in terms of international sovereignty. So much so that in the Visegrad countries a bottle of real coke was considered the nectar of gods and the drinking of it provided a rare and festive occasion.

We now can become true partners, instead of having the mentality of beggars. And this is no small thing. We should be proud of ourselves, and act on this pride.

Institutionalization Unnecessary

Apparently, the Visegrad Group has not fulfilled the hopes of its founding fathers. I was one of them. Some of us were dissidents, and some were intellectuals. Today, I would say that the statesmen of those times overestimated the Group’s possibilities. We lacked experience and new political alternatives. The differences between the three founding countries (today four) were also underestimated. They were tied together by the experiences of 1989, the collapse of the Soviet block, but it was precisely this "blocky" way of thinking that had covered up the underlying differences between Poles, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks (not to mention Czechs and Slovaks). This would include differing attitudes both towards communism and the proper strategy for exiting it. Jacques Rupnik was right in his rude comparison of such cooperation with freezers, which we open with high hopes, only to find old meat, quickly transforming into carrion leftovers. But this process doesn’t begin immediately.

The Visegrad Group has seen better and worse days – each of the member countries have seen periods when its ties in the region were stronger, but also periods when such relations thawed – or were even ignored. This is probably an ineradicable “defect”. And this is the reason why there should be something beyond such alternating political options.

What could make Visegrad stronger and more stable in the future? It is probably necessary to resist the temptation to institutionalize the V4 (the Visegrad Fund is a positive exception to this rule, as it ought to be preserved and even expanded!). But there should be a board of non-party thinkers (historians, political scientists, philosophers, etc.), not subject to change after each election cycle. This board should constantly try to formulate differences connecting these four countries. Certainly, there are things held in common, if only the stubborn facts geography (geopolitical) with a location in the center of Europe, and the experiences of two totalitarian regimes. The board should seek (again and again, more and more precisely) to define the relations of the V4, as a group, principally towards the European Union and NATO. And of course, Russia, Germany and Ukraine will need to be addressed. These “definitions” should include both recommendations and warnings.

Members of the board could be named partially by present heads of states and partially by the former heads of states, all from the ranks of non-party intellectuals. This could keep a certain kind of tradition or initiative in line with the role of heads of state, which are supposed to be above party politics. The heads of state would alternatively host (for example four times a year, paying only for room and board) the meeting of such a board, which could be comprised of twenty members.

The results of such a board could be used by political elites in all four countries and, of course, presented to the public in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.
Visegrad cooperation is based on the common geo-cultural heritage of our region. A lot more could be done to identify and demonstrate the commonalities of our culture. The dominant view in the Visegrad countries is still one of false national uniqueness. There has not been a breakthrough in terms of a tangible common identity for Visegrad citizens. Numerous institutions could be set up to create a Benelux or Scandinavian sense of togetherness. (e.g. common airlines and train companies, football and hockey leagues, joint song competitions, etc.) Even sources of information about each other in English are scarce, which makes it difficult for citizens to see the incredible parallels that do exist.

There are also bottlenecks. Due to linguistic closeness and a shared political past, Slovakia and the Czech Republic share an intimacy within the group that others will never share. In my view, human, economic and social relations between Hungary and Slovakia are excellent, but politicians in both countries exploit minor skirmishes (football games or extremist attacks) to instigate hatred between the two societies, all of which is blown out of proportion by irresponsible media. Supporters of Visegrad cooperation have not done enough to counterbalance this.

In itself, Poland is also a problem. It is only partially Central European, as its cultural history has been strongly influenced by the North Sea/Baltic States and Eastern Europe. It therefore has priorities that other Visegrad states do not share (mainly with regards to the Baltics, Belarus and Ukraine). Unlike the other three, it is also a nation with a “big country” identity. It often engages in European and world affairs (e.g. Iraq), with very strong positions that the other Visegrad states do not necessarily share.

In the economic domain, the four countries still regard each other as competitors for foreign direct investment rather than setting up a cooperative investment regimes, from which all states would benefit. The consequence of the present regime is a race to the bottom between Visegrad states, as a result of which all are underfinanced.

Thinking about the subject of Central Europe, it is hard for me to get beyond my own experience and look at the topic in purely objective terms. So I’ll begin with a consideration of the project to create a Central European supplement to the major newspapers in the Visegrad countries, which began in 1994, in which I was very much involved. I regret that this idea did not work as it was supposed to. It was difficult from the beginning, as the four main newspapers of the member countries were quite different, not so much in terms of the political line they represented, but in terms of size. Gazeta Wyborcza had correspondents in all the countries belonging to the group. I served in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, while in Hungary Wyborcza made contact with a journalist who lived there permanently. Other papers were not in such a comfortable position. Therefore, from the beginning there was a major difficulty in determining the form of cooperation. The Czech, Slovak and Hungarian papers were interested in rather brief pieces, which would take the place of correspondence. Meanwhile, Wyborcza was after long-form journalism, essays on a higher intellectual level. We finally managed to work out a compromise, at least for a while. Unfortunately, there were some financial problems and with time the collaboration was increasingly expensive. After a year and a half, the project collapsed. Only some vestigial traces remain in the title of a column in Wyborcza – “Gazeta Środkowoeuropejska” (Central-European). And even this column is not dedicated solely to the Visegrad Group, as there are texts about the Baltic States and the Balkans included. In short, it can be said that the failure of the project jeopardized the creation of Visegrad-focused public opinion.

Certainly, the reasons for the difficulties in the Visegrad cooperation may have roots in the more general avoidance of institutionalization at its very beginnings. Perhaps it was feared that the project would be misunderstood as an alternative to the European Union. I think that these fears were definitely overstated, since the EU supports all regional groups, even those formed around ad hoc problems. The personalized cooperation of the group makes it very sensi-
tive to the electoral fluctuations in politics and personnel of each country. Besides, if there are any bilateral problems, they affect the overall collaboration. I remember from my time at the Fund that during Slovak-Hungarian tensions any meetings between the two countries were virtually limited to summits. Of course, the quadrirpartite meetings have an intrinsic value: they bring normalcy and civilized manners to international relations. After more than twenty years of cooperation, we would easily forget this, since the right relationships have become a matter of course.

Spectacular successes are not always achieved. The countries of the group are varied in terms of size, and vary on priorities of foreign policy and economic aims. For obvious reasons, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary will not be as interested in maritime policy as Poland. Cooperation based on professional, expert rules, a regular and permanent schedule of meetings, even creating a small secretariat certainly would positively affect its work.

I also hunger for the use of the full potential of the project. For example, in response to the crisis, I did see a joint position developed. And even if there was one, such a voice was not heard. The Visegrad Group does not live up to the chance of becoming a nucleus around which we could build a group of interests. Although all the four countries see Eastern policy and the Eastern Partnership as important, and each places this high in their hierarchy of objectives – as evidenced by the Prime Ministers’ decision to increase the Visegrad Fund – which I believe is an important gesture, a clear declaration is missing. These are certainly challenges and limitations that must be addressed.

Apart from the undeniable success that is the very existence of the Visegrad Group, the importance of the Visegrad Fund, as a tool, should be emphasized. It is actually the only joint institution created by the four member states. Its continuous development, and the diversity of its ideas and programs, support the spirit of Visegrad and fulfil the mission of attracting neighbouring countries to Europe and the EU. That is encouraging. Besides, the Fund is not a political institution with all associated rights and obligations, which has a positive influence on its work. Though it already performs some activities, such as the administration of the Visegrad Group website, it is not able to replace a secretariat, the need for which I have already mentioned.

In regards to the goals and challenges facing the Visegrad, the Group ought to develop a common position on the financial crisis, or a general position on the crisis of the European Union, which impacts everyone at some level. Another important issue is the Eastern Partnership and the whole neighbourhood policy of the European Union, in which the Visegrad Group has a vital interest. Much has been done by the Polish Institute in cooperation with Hungarians, Slovak and Czechs, all within the Visegrad format. There has been a Visegrad Salon in Bratislava for several years, which was conceived by Péter Krasztev and continued by his successor. In this project, there are regular meetings of experts (three to five times a year) on specific topics, such as the issue of drug policy and the employment of graduates. In addition to participation in these debates, the Institute is also involved in organizing the “Days of Visegrad” in Košice. The event lasts for a whole month, during which time there are concerts, film screenings, theatre performances, visual art exhibitions, etc. Cooperation in such matters visibly stands out. In addition, many Polish diplomats work in the Visegrad format, as the promotion of Poland alone is not as attractive to diplomatic audiences and lacks clout, when compared to the effect achieved when the four countries find a common language. In countries such as the United States, Mexico and Japan, co-operation in this dimension works far better than individual actions.

I think that setting a grandiose goal for the Visegrad Group makes no sense. The problem with this cooperation is as follows. There is a great deal happening. The number of meetings at different levels, especially for the experts, is immense. But on the other hand, this type of work is inherently uninteresting for the media, so hardly anyone is interested in the group or knows anything about it. The Visegrad Group’s webpage took years to appear. A lack of information meant that from time to time, either in the Czech, Polish, Slovak or Hungarian newspapers, reports appeared that the V4 was dead or that the cooperation was limited to presidents socializing at the major castles, having casual conversations over a glass of wine. Now, thanks to the website, you can at least trace the intensity of contacts. For example, when Slovakia chaired the group last year, we were hosting Polish delegations here (two or three times a month). The arrangements are worked out in small steps, which is not very attractive and not suitable for headlines. However, this painstaking work has considerable value; even if it is not noticed because it is not media-friendly. The intensity of contacts, however, does not translate into the creation of a common position on international issues. Therefore, what I find lacking within the structure of the Visegrad Group is a central institution, which would command a more complete grasp of the situation and be able to direct the Group.

Undoubtedly, the Visegrad Group has to grapple with many internal problems, including difficult historical legacies, which cause bilateral disputes between countries. This certainly affects the pace, style and intensity of contacts. Problems of this type return periodically, often set to the rhythm of election campaigns. And they probably cannot be avoided. Fortunately, these are not dramatic conflicts or conflicts of interest that could not be reconciled in principle. For obvious reasons, there are disputes due to different economic priorities, but they should not destabilize cooperation. More annoying are the little things that could be done much faster. These are mainly communication problems: the lack of highways connecting the Visegrad countries, the poor and ever-changing rail systems, or the suspension of direct flights from Bratislava to Warsaw, and other related matters that cause discomfort for citizens travelling within the group. There is probably less obstruction between Slovakia and Hungary, or Slovakia and the Czech Republic. By contrast, Poland is still behind in this respect. While I understand that this is due to long-standing underdevelopment, which is difficult to overcome quickly, it still causes a great deal of discomfort. Sometimes we might want to leave behind the big political goals and take care of the little things that can be eliminated relatively easily. /
FIRST CONGRESS OF VISEGRAD between Bohemian (Czech), Hungarian and Polish kings to form a peace alliance. Various regional cooperation of lesser importance followed.

1335

1991

1993

1999

OCTOBER 6TH A SUMMIT OF PRIME MINISTERS TOOK PLACE IN KRAKOW. The declaration drafted accelerated the effort to gain NATO and EC membership and worked towards cooperation on foreign policy, market, transport, ecology and science between the V4 countries. The Kraków Declaration was signed.

FEBRUARY 15TH DECLARATION OF COOPERATION IN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION was signed in Visegrad by the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel, the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, József Antall.

JANUARY 1ST VELVET DIVORCE. Czechoslovakia dissolved into two separate states

MARCH 12TH POLAND, HUNGARY AND CZECH REPUBLIC JOINED NATO.

1989

1992

1992

JULY 8-9TH POLAND, THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND HUNGARY WERE INVITED TO THE NATO AND EU SUMMIT IN MADRID. North Atlantic Council (NAC) signed the Madrid Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation, which contained the invitation for these 3 countries to NATO membership, followed by the decision to sign the Access Protocols in December 1997, gaining effective membership before the end of 1999.

CENTRAL EUROPEAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (CEFTA) was signed by representatives of the V4 countries: Vladimir Dlouhy (Czech Minister of Industry and Trade), Andrzej Arendarski (Polish Minister of Foreign Economic Cooperation), Ludovit Cermák (Slovakian Minister of Economics) and Bela Kadar (Hungarian Minister of International Economic Relations). For some commentators it was a maturity test before integration with Western Europe

DEMOCRATIC REFORMS in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, followed by the withdrawal of Soviet troops

1989

1992

1992

1997

VISEGRAD TIME
HUNGARY PROPOSED THE CREATION OF A LITERARY ANTHOLOGY OF THE VISEGRAD FOUR COUNTRIES, dedicated to intercultural dialogue, within the workings of the Visegrad Fund. The project is based on translating and publishing selected literature into the V4’s languages and English. Moreover, the Polish side initiated a working group for cultural heritage in the V4 states.

2006

JUNE 18TH PRIME MINISTERS OF THE V4 COUNTRIES HOLD A SUMMIT IN BUDAPEST. The International Visegrad Fund’s budget was increased by up to 5 mln euro, based on equal contributions by the Visegrad Group countries.

2007

GAS CRISIS resulting from a dispute between Russia and Ukraine, it raised V4 awareness about gas geo-politics. First studies and decision made to enhance cooperation in this respect.

2009

IDEA OF A VISEGRAD BATTLEGROUP ON STANDBY BY 2018 HAS EMERGED. V4 summit in Bratislava dedicated to 20th anniversary of the founding of the Visegrad Group held. EU Presidencies of Hungary and Poland in the first and second half of the year.

2011

A short list of events and dates of key importance to the Visegrad Group. This list is not complete but offers a spectrum of activities resulting from the cooperation.
How did the Visegrad cooperation begin?

I remember three crucial moments. The first was connected with my work in the Hungarian Democratic Forum – a conservative liberal-nationalist party. I was the first spokesman of the movement and I also worked in the international affairs commission of the Forum, where I had the task of drawing up a model of the future cooperation with our neighboring countries. In the summer of 1989, we were working on the Democratic Forum program in close cooperation with Poland and Czechoslovakia – a sort of a triangle – and it became one of the priorities of our foreign policy. We didn’t use the word “Visegrad”, of course, but in those days I thought that this area required our immediate attention. We wanted to attain a status similar to Finland.

We already had relations with Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland. For example, the deputies of the “Solidarność” Citizens Committee and those from the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia from Krakow came to the first rally of
the Democratic Forum in Budapest in 1989. Those ties built the long-term relations important for politics, with the presence, for example, of a Solidarność delegation led by Bogdan Borusewicz, the present head of the Polish Senate, at the next rally in October.

The second thing was the meeting that was a founding meeting, in some sense, which took place before the Visegrad era on April 9th, 1990 in Bratislava. President Havel invited us. It was one day after the second round of the Hungarian elections, and we were invited to Bratislava with other politicians and diplomats to a big meeting. Our Hungarian delegation was quite strange and somehow similar to the Polish delegation, because the leader of the Polish delegation was the leader of the “junta”, President Jaruzelski, but Prime Minister Mazowiecki was also present. The Hungarian delegation seemed to be even more complex, as it consisted of the entire communist elite with Prime Minister Miklós Németh on the forefront, with comrade Gyula Horn – later the post-communist Hungarian Prime Minister – and there were obviously others, from the opposing parties too.

Because of the elections and my duties as a spokesman, I didn’t sleep much during those days. So when we went out at 6 am, I wasn’t yet aware that soon we would create a new government with the Independent Smallholders’ Party and the Christian Democratic People’s Party. When we arrived, it turned out that although we had won the elections before the meeting, we still couldn’t have the full mandate during the proceedings. It was a strange situation, which was later resolved after the departure of the official deputies of the Hungarian state in the early afternoon. We stayed there on a semiprivate basis to talk about the necessity of cooperation.

The third moment was the initiative of Prime Minister József Antall, who had been elected in the April elections and thought that Visegrad could be a symbol of this cooperation. We knew that there was a meeting of the kings in Visegrad in 14th century, during which some mutual agreements were made and some loans given to protect peace in the region. Today, we would say it was an international political-economic cooperation. We were in a great need of such symbols in those times, and I believe we still are.

Why was the need for cooperation so obvious?

From my point of view, it was a kind of Hungarian tradition. In particular, I mean the work of the so-called folk writers of the interwar period, like László Németh. In a series of essays, he proved that after the tragedy of the Treaty of Trianon, which established the borders of the present state that encompassed 30% of its previous area, we can’t think of Hungary in the categories of the medieval kingdom of Stephen I. We have to think about the Hungarian nation in general, as one of many nations living in Central Europe. Here we live together in a community of nations, like foster brothers. That is, like brothers that don’t have the same blood but were breast-fed by the same mother. Don’t you think so?

László Németh’s metaphor highlights the necessity of getting to know the history of neighboring nations, and the necessity of relinquishing all the Hungarian stereotypes which made us feel superior to our neighbors. I became aware of that for the first time in 1968, when a large shift occurred in the prevailing negative Hungarian stereotypes of the Czechs. The other thing was that the Hungarians took part in the intervention in Czechoslovakia, as part of the Warsaw Pact. That was the first moment like this for us, because in 1956 the Hungarians felt alone. Although that feeling was very well illustrated by Zbigniew Herbert, in the poem entitled “To the Hungarians” (“Węgrom”) in which he repeated that others sympathized with us but kept their distance at the same time.

It was during the intervention in Czechoslovakia that my generation came to understand that if we wanted to do something, we should do it together. That was the type of inspiration that we had. Apart from that, Prime Minister Antall was a high school history teacher and he helped to give our thinking historical categories. He himself thought within historical categories.

Is common memory the most important feature of the Central European cooperation?

There are two dimensions here. We lack the political dimension now, especially during the European Union crisis. I don’t notice any initiatives, either from the Visegrad countries or Poland. We hoped that Poland, as the country which is the largest and most the most significant political clout, would take the initiative to address some issues together. Nothing like that has occurred.

The other dimension is symbolic. Apart from the name, there are no common symbols, and there is still no common memory. In fact, all European memory is divided. Anyway, our Central Eastern European zone exists, a zone in which people remember two totalitarian systems, while in the West they remember only one. But in the last twenty years, we haven’t been able to work out a base for common historical memory, although there are such historical dates on which it could build it: 1956, 1968 and 1989. We have to build it, because these memories contain the same stirrings and problems that provide strength for further cooperation. / Translated by Aleksandra Bilewicz

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Regional Cooperation in Europe

Examples and Inspirations

Benelux

An economic union of three neighboring countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg that had its beginnings just after the Second World War, adjusting common economic policies. In 1951, members of Benelux joined West Germany, France, and Italy to form the European Coal and Steel Community. The main institutions of the Benelux Union are the Committee of Ministers, the Parliament, the Council of the Union, the Court of Justice, the Secretariat-General, the Organization for Intellectual Property. The Benelux Secretary General is located in Brussels. It is the central administrative pillar of the Benelux Economic Union. It handles the secretariat of the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Economic Union and the various committees and working parties. Moreover, it ensures the registry of the Benelux Court of Justice.

Dates:
- 1922: Belgian-Luxembourg Economic Union was created.
- 1943: Monetary Convention of Benelux signed by governments in exile in London.
- 1948: Customs Union between the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg entered into effect. The three countries exempted their mutual trade from customs duty and applied a uniform tariff for third countries.
- 1958: Treaty establishing the Benelux Economic Union was signed and entered into effect in 1960. The 3 countries work in unison on the completion of the internal market, the strengthening of cross-frontier cooperation and integration in the European Union.
- 2008: The new Benelux Treaty confirms this endeavor for an indefinite duration.

Website: www.benelux.int

Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is the term used by the European Union for the sub-region comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro. With the exception of Albania, the countries of the Western Balkans were formerly constituent republics of the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After 1991, the EU’s main objective for the Western Balkans region is to create a situation where military conflict is unthinkable – expanding the peace, stability, prosperity and freedom, established over the last fifty years in the European Union. The countries of the Western Balkans have all been given the prospect of EU membership.
**Nordic Council**

The Nordic Council is the Nordic parliamentary co-operation forum. The Council acts as an advisory body for the Nordic governments. The Nordic Council’s members work partly in the Council’s Presidium and five political committees and partly in their respective party groups. The Nordic Council’s Session takes place once a year. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden take turns hosting the Session. The Nordic parliamentarians meet in this plenary assembly.

The purpose of Nordic co-operation is, on the one hand, to make it attractive to live, work and do business in the Nordic Region, and on the other hand, to strengthen the Nordic countries internationally. This is done by Nordic co-operation in many areas such as, for example, research, the environment, welfare and culture.

**EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

A strategy to boost the development of the Danube Region was proposed by the European Commission on the 8th of December 2010 (Commission Communication - EU Strategy for the Danube Region). Member States endorsed the EU Strategy for the Danube Region at the General Affairs Council on the 13th of April 2011 (Council Conclusions).

In short, it is a macro-regional development strategy and action plan for the regions and countries located in the catchment area of the Danube river. It targets the sustainable development of the Danube macro-region as well as the protection of its natural areas, landscapes and cultural heritage. It includes all the territory of Hungary, nearly all parts of Austria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and the FRY Macedonia, including significant parts of Bosnia - Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Moldova and small parts of Germany and Ukraine.

It is designed to make improvements in those regions addressing necessary reforms in the following areas: economic development, transport, energy and security.

**Eastern Partnership (EaP)**

It is a project carried out by the European Commission on the initiative of Poland and Sweden. The cooperation between Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia aims at the improvement of political and economic trade-relations. It was inaugurated in 2009. Among its activities, the main focus is on visa agreements, free trade deals and strategic partnership agreements with the EU’s eastern neighbors. Notably, a Civil Society Forum has been created to consult and influence policy-making.

The Eastern Partnership project does not have its own secretariat and is controlled directly by the European Commission.

**Dates:**

- 1954 Nordic Labor Market was created.
- 1955 Nordic Convention on Social Security was implemented.
- 1958 Nordic Passport Union.
- 1970 Nordic Industrial Fund was opened.
- 1973 Denmark joined the EEC.
- 1983 The Nordic Science Policy Council was set up.
- 1983 A joint energy network was established.
- 1987 Nordic Language Convention (citizens of the Nordic countries have the opportunity to use their native language when interacting with official bodies in other Nordic countries without being liable to any interpretation or translation costs)
- 1995 Sweden and Finland joined the EU
- 2008 Iceland joined the UE

**Website:** [www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org)

**Website:** [www.eea.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm](http://www.eea.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm)

**EU Strategy Community:** [www.easternpartnership.org](http://www.easternpartnership.org)
For decades, civil society has been understood as one of the pillars of democracy, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. The region has faced several radical shifts when it comes to understanding the concept and its function in society. During communism, the formation of an independent sector of civil society was one of the main strategies of the dissident sector in its strive to regain independence and sovereignty. After the transitions of 1989, the civil society sector underwent a major transformation and took the form of a third sector, largely created by the NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) sphere. However, over the last few years, all over the region, there seems to have been a revival of the idea of a politicized civil society that might lead to re-configuration of political and social sphere. This would also challenge several myths surrounding this issue, which currently influence our understanding of the topic of civil society.

**Myth 1.**

The first myth is that civil society was formed solely by the dissident sector. This had tremendous consequences for the development of the sector, as it raised high expectations. For the anti-communist dissidents, the formation of an independent civil society was a novel and efficient tactic in their struggles against authoritarian regimes. As Maryjane Osa writes: “The program of reconstruction [sic!] of civil society, which the Eastern European dissidents used, was born in Poland in the late seventies” (Arato 2000: 45). Influential intellectuals from Eastern Europe generally saw the reform of the communist system as impossible. They also accepted the idea of an autonomous civil society as an alternative space for opposition activities. After 1976, the opposition, instead of fighting for political power, became advocates for increasingly independent social and cultural activities that would limit the scope of state control over society (Osa 2008: 217). Its independence from authority was a challenge to the regime. As one of the leaders of the democratic opposition in Poland, Bronisław Geremek, described things: “the idea of a civil society – even one that avoids overtly political activities in favor of education, the exchange of information and opinion, or the protection of the basic interests of the particular groups – has enormous anti-totalitarian potential.” (Geremek 1992: 4). Most of the concepts of “parallel societies” or structures offered by Havel, Michnik, Konrad were, in fact, challenging the authorities.

Outside of Poland, where the Solidarność movement had 9 to 10 million members at its peak, civil society structures in Central and Eastern Europe were relatively weak. Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia had only a few hundred members. Beyond the activity of dissidents, there were two other areas within the society often neglected by observers. First, there was civic society (Buchowski 1996) or the “imperfect civil society” (Ekiert and Foa 2011): an array of state-controlled organizations dealing with nature conservation, cultural life and the arts. This was (and generally still is) a large group – for instance, in Poland there are 1 million people organized within voluntary fire brigades, which were also popular in Czechoslovakia and East Germany. But most people were outside of both of these circles, creating the “silent majority” (Wertenstein-Zulawski 1991). In Hungary, “Goulash
Communism was in force (a social contract giving Hungarians some economic liberty in return for giving up political demands). These dis-engaged masses were the predecessors of the later descriptions of demobilized and apathetic societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Myth 2.**

The newly formed civil society, after 1989, is said to be depoliticized. During communism, civil society was an openly political project. The transformations of 1989 changed the sphere of civil society by focusing it on particular issues and campaigns, along with making it an increasingly professional field. People previously engaged in civil society actions have since moved to political parties, trade unions, administration etc. In this sense, one has to take a broader perspective when comparing civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe during the communist period and afterwards.

At the same time, the region has witnessed a number of mobilizations that were later labeled “uncivil”, mostly because of the use of violence by members. These mobilizations were largely organized by social movements, from both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. There were large demonstrations organized by alter-globalists in 2000 in Prague, street riots in Budapest in 2006, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, just to name a few. All these events mobilized tens of thousands of people, and – at least for some time – developed a stable structures in the form of social movements or political parties.

Of course, the “third sector” that consists mostly of NGOs is less politicized than the dissidents during communism were, primarily because of a dependence on authorities for funding: including the state, supra-national organizations (such as the EU or UN) and big businesses. This does not mean that all actions in the civil society sector have become similarly de-politicized and that they can be reduced to NGOs alone. The recent wave of the “Indignados” spreading around the world (with lesser intensity in Central and Eastern Europe) is an important example that breaks the pattern in question. Also, in times of need, societies in the region proved to be capable of mobilization and effective action: for example, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, protests against the new media law and constitution in Hungary, and the Slovak campaign against President Meciar.

**Myth 3.**

Finally, there is a myth that civil society is weak in Central and Eastern Europe. This myth has been employed by politicians and by the NGOs, for whom it served as a justification for funding. Marc Howard (2003) claims this is a product of several characteristics of post-socialism. He points to the following: distrust of membership in organizations (which was often mandatory before the transition), strong family and informal ties, and a general disappointment with politics. This is also connected with the growing professionalization of the civil society sector, consisting mostly of NGOs. After 1989, political initiatives as well as labor strikes and similar initiatives were not regarded as part of this sphere. Before 1989, strikes were, for instance, one of the main action frames for the Solidarność movement, although they were often regarded as “uncivil”.

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An additional development was the phenomenon of transactional activism (Tarrow and Petrova 2007) – a strategy of civil society actors that were focused more on promoting their goals and providing expert knowledge, rather than on mass social mobilizations. NGOs, however small in terms of numbers of their members, were as effective as vehicles of mass mobilizations by precisely formulating their claims (targeting of their audiences) and networking effectively. Contrasted with the Autumn of the Nations in 1989 and mobilizations in other parts of the world, this might have lead one to conclude that civil society in the region is weak. But looking at mobilizations with a more political orientation (taking Hungary as an example), one can observe much higher social vibrancy than should be expected from pessimistic reports on social activities and civil society in the region.

Conclusions

The three aforementioned mentioned myths about civil society in Central and Eastern Europe have several consequences. Firstly, they blur the history of civil society in the region, which triggered far-reaching expectations. This situation shows that it is difficult to compare the civil society created by dissidents (even if we acknowledge the existence of the state sanctioned sector) with that of today. Civil society during communism had a much broader spectrum of groups involved in its creation and it employed a much broader repertoire of tactics.

REFERENCES

ertoire of action. What relation might this have with today’s most contentious mobilizations and movements? There are some groups that mobilize their supporters for purposes not aimed at stabilizing or strengthening democracy, but the dissident groups of the 1980s were also targeting their actions against state structures and power.

The three myths analyzed here have influenced civil society to a limited extent. What they have changed is our thinking about this sector and our expectations about its function and role in society. We think of civil society more in terms of the performance certain services for society (in education, environmental protection or social services), rather than as a sphere between the private and the public. The last characteristic of civil society is particularly interesting at present, thanks to the development of new media and social networks. What once required many meetings, a dense network of trusted participants and occasionally some conspiracy, nowadays can be achieved with one (or a few) clicks of a mouse. Recent developments in North Africa show that this method of communication and cooperation has tremendous potential and far-reaching consequences, political ones included. On the other hand, critics might say that it diverts people from real activism and actions: one would rather follow things on Twitter or Facebook than go out into the streets and do something. But in a world where knowledge is power, this sphere has the potential to re-define the meaning of civil society.

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SLOVAKIA:
- Number of NGOs: 34,947 (as of 2010)
- Number of Volunteers: 699,000 (as of 2004)
- Percentage of Volunteers as Percentage of Population: 13% (as of 2004)

HUNGARY:
- Number of NGOs: 66,145 (as of 2009)
- Number of Members: 4,382,951 members (as of 2008)
- Number of Volunteers: 472,000 (as of 2007)
- Percentage of Volunteers as Percentage of Population: 5.5% (as of 2007)

FINANCES:

POLAND:
- Total income of NGOs in 2008 – PLN 12.7 billion (approx. EUR 3 billion)
- Income from 1% of Income Tax in 2010: PLN 400 million (approx. EUR 96 million)
- Sources of Financing: Government, Self-Government, EU and Foreign Subsidies, Donations, 1% Tax Designations, Membership Fees, Profits from Activities, other NGOs, Financial Mechanisms, and Fundraising

CZECH REPUBLIC:
- Total Income of NGOs in 2008: CZK 52.501 billion (approx. EUR 2 billion)
- Sources of Financing: Government, Self-Government, EU and Foreign Subsidies, Donations, Membership Fees, Profits from Activities, other NGOs, Financial Mechanisms, and Fundraising

SLOVAKIA:
- Total income of NGOs in 2002: Sk 18.103 billion (approx. EUR 601 million)
- Income from 2% of Income Tax in 2011: EUR 41 595 000
- Sources of Financing: Government, Self-Government, EU and Foreign Subsidies, Donations, 2% Tax Designation, other NGOs, Financial Mechanisms, Official Development Assistance, Membership Fees, and Profits from Activities

HUNGARY:
- Total Income of NGOs in 2010: HUF 1,202 billion (approx. EUR 4.3 billion)
- Income from 1% of Income Tax in 2011: HUF 8,956,783,238
- Sources of Financing: Government, Self-Government, EU and Foreign Subsidies, Donations, 1% Tax Designation, Membership Fees, Profits from Activities, other NGOs, Financial Mechanisms, and Fundraising

Source: Statistical services of V4 countries, USAID and EU information pages
PASOS is a Central European think tank network that was created by liberal policy makers across the region. Two of their most committed officers tell the story of its beginnings, achievements, failures and overall strategy. Following many policy and research initiatives devoted to EU integration, they focus on the prospects of Eastern Partnership and the role of the Visegrad Group on this front. The section “Think Tank Watch” will provide in-depth evaluation of policies developed by think tanks in the region.

When did you set up the PASOS network?
The idea came partly from the Open Society Institute in Budapest. At first, it was a network of loosely connected think-tanks that were supposed to correlate their efforts for better policy making in the region. OSI wanted to gather and meet with those that they had supported thus far. This happened around the year 2000. They asked the Institute of Public Affairs to coordinate the first meeting of the Soros Related Policy Institutes with several think-tanks. Then the network gradually expanded, organizing meetings and presenting project areas. During that time, we shared our experiences and set up new initiatives and projects.

The first large joint project was set up to monitor and forecast the expansion of the Schengen border, both in the new EU member states and our neighbors behind this new paper curtain. It was set up by our coalition of the willing – think-tanks that recognized the importance of correlating efforts in research and policy making. Several years later, we have decided to make an independent and self-governing body out of this network. I can’t even remember how many there were, but the key to our success was being institutionalized.

We decided to set up an office in Prague, and we held our first General Assembly in 2004. There we adopted a common statute. Jeff Lovit, former spokesman of Transparency International, moved from Berlin to become our director.

What inspired you to take these steps?
We did not have a clear example to follow. In some sense, the OSI has inspired us, but with respect to institutionalizing ourselves... that was our own initiative. In fact, I would say that our work has served
as an example to others. It proved useful when we started working on the European Partnership for Democracy – a network of institutions devoted to democracy building. PASOS is a member of the EPD, but one of the more notable contributions we made was know-how in making an institution out of a network. Another example is the Civil Society Forum of Eastern Partnership, where Jeff Lovitt is currently the head of the Steering Committee.

How successful has PASOS been so far? What has not been accomplished?
The expansion of our network and conferences speak for themselves. PASOS has become a channel for some projects of members, including one researching the promotion of democracy by the Visegrad Group. The results of this research demonstrated how former recipients of pro-democratic aid have recently become first-rate promoters of democratic transformation elsewhere, especially in Eurasia and North Africa. Presentation of this research by PASOS that was held in Brussels and Washington demonstrated that Visegrad cooperation could be a useful tool in the promotion of democracy.

Some challenges lie ahead. It is hard to avoid bias concerning certain projects undertaken by Visegrad-based think-tanks or even those from other countries of the EU, like the Baltic States. Even among the Baltic States participation is uneven. For instance, Latvian institutes are true engines of the PASOS cooperation. It all depends on the will and capacity to invest in long-term cooperation.

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that most of their citizens yearn for closer integration with the member-states of the EU.

The Eastern Partnership itself does not offer a recipe for overcoming democratic shortcomings nor a roadmap for EU’s integration, but it does provide a scope for strategic agreements between the EU and partner countries. The focus in particular on trade relations and moving towards visa-free travel offer the prospect of greater freedom of movement that would remove the borders erected by new EU member states as a requirement for their entry into Schengen. It is imperative that the people of the neighboring countries (and of course of Kosovo, Russia and Central Asia) should be able to travel freely all over Europe – to be able to see how others live with their own eyes. The fight against communism was not fought to erect new barriers between those whose transition has progressed well and others whose transition to democracy has stalled or, in some cases, reversed.

The Eastern Partnership’s focus on visa-free travel requires an immense effort on the part of partner countries to meet the technical criteria required by the EU, and also political will on the side of the governments of partner countries and EU member states. The tougher requirements on the migration policy will not make it easy, but it is important that the EU recognizes progress made and fulfills its obligations to lift visa requirements.

Another feature of the Eastern Partnership that is particularly valued within PASOS is the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. PASOS has member think-tanks in all six partner countries (four in Moldova, for instance), and there are excellent prospects for building coalitions and cross-country comparative policy analysis that can be presented at the intergovernmental level with the increasing professionalization of the civil society forum. Commissioner Füle has consistently been supportive of greater inclusion of civil society representatives in intergovernmental meetings, a position also actively pursued by the European External Action Service. The big challenge is to see more openness from

the governmental side of partner countries. In November of 2011, Belarus dropped its veto (at least for the coming year) on the participation of civil society forum representatives in thematic platform meetings. That was good news, but it is incumbent on PASOS members and other experts on key policy areas affecting EU-Eastern partner relations to ensure that full use is made of this access by presenting clearly argued analysis and practical policy recommendations.

For PASOS, spreading individual liberty and fostering democracy are a priority, and positive examples in one or more partner countries – drawing on the lessons of the transition experience of new EU member-states – will be powerful incentives to the other partner countries to accelerate their own democratic transformation.

**WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS TODAY AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE IN THE FUTURE AS A NETWORK?**

Our goals remain rooted in our core mission – to support the work of independent think-tanks in their work to promote and protect democracy, human rights, the rule of law, open society values, and sustainable economic and social development in their respective countries. There are three pillars to the work of PASOS – network communication, acting as a resource for members, providing them with donor news, and news about each other’s plans and activities, and of course bringing them together so they can exchange ideas, conceive and implement joint projects. Network-wide action through joint projects and accompanying advocacy promoting core values of democracy and human rights, which remain under threat in much of CEE and Central Asia (of course, this includes shaping EU-wide policy debates and agenda-setting, as well as capacity-building and standards-setting, ranging from training on policy-writing, communications for think-tanks, and understanding EU policymaking, to a range of mentoring and fellowship programs, and the PASOS initiative on setting standards for quality controls and ethical governance in the work of independent think-tanks).

The network continues to grow, and the members are increasingly recognized as leaders in the think-tank marketplace. A key goal is to see the increasing impact of their work, and – except in the most closed countries – to see them recognized as key partners by their respective governments and, where relevant, by the key EU decision-makers. PASOS can contribute to this by linking the members up with international policymakers, by forging joint projects where raising standards in policy work by think-tanks and advocacy at the international level play central roles. If the network – by which I mean the member think-tanks, working both individually and on joint projects – can become even more visible due to thoroughly researched incisive policy analysis, presented to the right decision-makers at the most opportune time in the policymaking cycle, then we will know we are on the right track.

The author is the Executive Director of PASOS. He currently lives in Prague.
Jindřich Štreit
from the collection Chlévská lýrika
January of 2009 was cold. Not simply in meteorological terms, but also with respect to politics. Central Europe experienced a genuine shortage of gas due to the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute. Experts and analysts similarly cite this event as a turning point in thinking about energy security, which is a relatively new discipline primarily concerned with gas delivery, although the field is constantly expanding and can now be studied for an M.A. title – it recently appeared, for example, as an English-language offering at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.

Numerous studies have been published. In collaboration with other institutions in V4 countries and with the support of the Visegrad Fund, the Kosciuszko Institute has even established an Energy Security Index for the Visegrad countries. It suggests that its methodology could only be used for three of the V4. For uncertain reasons, Hungary, dependent on...
gas for domestic and heating purposes and with significant domestic resources, does not fit into the categories of the index. The Index has unsurprisingly shown that the Czech Republic is in the most secure position, followed unexpectedly by Slovakia and then Poland. This small lexicon of gas geopolitics will attempt to suggest a few new angles through which to view the issue. It is not exhaustive, but should function as a handbook for those trying to orientate themselves in the ever changing "gas field" of Central Europe. The players are almost always the same, but the conditions – political and economic – are often rapidly transforming. Finally, the lexicon is arranged logically, rather than alphabetically.

**Cooperation or Competition**

Last year, Visegrad Four energy security was closely tied with gas, even as the issue of nuclear energy became increasingly important. Post-communist members of the EU have approached Russian gas deliveries differently than their older EU colleagues, which has been an important impediment to the formation of a common EU energy policy. And in fact, this is an issue where greater Visegrad cooperation might prove more efficacious, as even things so basic as interconnectors are extraordinarily difficult to agree upon and build. A meaningful solution would involve a functioning internal and liberal EU market, in which the issue of unbundling (separation of different companies dealing with gas trade, delivery and transport) will be of particular importance. According to Urban Rusnák, Slovak special envoy for energy security, the interplay between cooperation and competition contains three layers: 1) The State, which has mostly limited competence over the energy mix, 2) The EU, where the most important discussions take place, although it is unrealistic to expect common policy in short and medium term 3) Companies or the corporate sector, which implements policies but has different interests. While the state is believed to be interested in energy security, private companies are interested in profits. And since we have seen an outflow of the big Western companies from Central Europe in the last ten years, the only solution is to put a stress on the national level, with national and then regional solutions.

**EU’s Role**

In an article by Friedbert Pflüger, the European Centre for Energy and Resource Security at King’s College in London, gas relations between the EU and Russia were described as a difficult balance in which Gazprom attempts to increase its share of downstream (customers), as it is simultaneously subjected to investigations and raids conducted by the EU authorities. Pflüger wrote that Gazprom’s investments in the European gas markets, whether upstream or downstream, should not be discouraged as long as it adheres to the EU market rules and regulations and operates on a level playing field. Recently, the EU Energy Commissioner Gunther Oettinger unveiled a new EU External Energy Policy proposal that he said will “establish a new mechanism to ensure proper ex-ante and ex-post coordination and cooperation for the conclusion of intergovernmental agreements.” One of the key elements of the proposal would require EU Member States to report all new and existing bilateral energy
deals with partner countries to the EU Commission. Hence, before an agreement enters into force, the Commission would have the right to confirm in advance if the bilateral agreement is compatible with EU law. Poland remembers well when the Commission entered into new long-term contract with Gazprom in the fall of 2010, considered too pro-Russian and not corresponding with an emerging EU approach.

Should the proposal be accepted by member states, before entering into any future agreements Gazprom and other foreign investors would have to comply with EU’s transparency and industry accounting standards, as well as market liberalization policies. In theory, this would deter monopolistic activity and enhance competition, simultaneously allowing investors to avoid potentially costly litigation resulting from non-compliance issues. Although the proposal is viewed by some as a potential deterrent to Russian investments in the EU, the added legal security it provides could in fact stimulate Russian investments. Friedbert Pflüger concluded that a greater Russian stake in the European energy markets would, in turn, make future gas supply disruptions less likely, as this would harm its own business interests.

**Dependency on Gas**

Gas is based on long-term contracts and the use of pipelines, making it the least flexible part of the national energy mix. Together with nuclear energy it enables European countries to fulfill Kyoto criteria for lower emissions of greenhouse gases. The price to be paid for this is an increased dependency on imports from third parties. In 2009, 45% of EU gas consumption was covered by non-EU imports (from Norway, Russia, Algeria and Libya). The importance of gas will grow in the future as coal and nuclear-fueled power stations end their production cycles and Norway’s production declines. The growing importance of gas also coincides with the decision of the German government to phase out all nuclear reactors. For the EU, gas is the third most important source of energy (after oil and coal). The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that over the next decade, despite concerted efforts by EU countries to expand renewable energy capacity and enhance energy efficiency, natural gas (alongside coal) will become the second most important energy source in Europe, behind oil.

**Gas Logic**

After the fall of communism, gas geopolitics in Central Europe has become a peculiar game. Governments officially support market deregulation, but are not able to invest in interconnections. This unwillingness is incited, supported and exploited by major European players, especially Gazprom. The recently opened Nord Stream and planned South Stream are not driven by market logic or viable business plans, but only by forces “from behind” who might have hidden interests. Major Western companies are leaving Central Europe (consider the attempt by Gaz de France and E.On Ruhrgas to sell their minority share in the Slovakian transport company SPP, or RWE selling Czech operator Net4Gas), as the Nord Stream and South Stream allows the Russians to determine gas delivery. The original idea behind Nord Stream was to export gas from the Shtokman field, which was never developed, meaning that the same amount of gas can now bypass Ukraine and Central Europe. Within the EU, the Slovaks feel especially vulnerable and are already counting on the construction of the South Stream. For them, this would mean – not having any alternative routes and stocks – being totally dependent on Russia via Ukrainian deliveries. Again, South and Nord Stream are not modeled on market rules. Therefore, Western market logic should apply to their function and use. It is not only that Central Europe could be blackmailed politically, but also different vested interests could enrich various elements in the energy food chain. Part of this logic, which is not purely economic or political, is that Russians are not investing in the development of new gas fields, the infrastructure is in poor shape, and there are even some estimates that Russia itself will not have enough gas to meet demand. Where has all the money gone? According to some unofficial estimates in Russia, 30 to 50% of prices are eaten by kickbacks for various groups feeding on the projects.

**Russia**

With unpredictable behavior, vast resources, creaking infrastructure and dependence on the EU market, Russia is an uncertain partner. In short, the relationship between the EU and Russia is based on mutual dependency and distrust. Nevertheless, the EU’s dependence on Russian gas deliveries is growing and will continue to grow due to the German decision to close nuclear power stations and a desire to meet emissions reduction criteria. The EU’s gas imports from Russia are now 40.8% of all total imports, and this share will grow as the total import of gas into the EU grows. At present, imports account for about 60% of gas consumption. According to some estimates, 73 to 79% of total consumption will be imported by 2020, while the Russian share would grow to around 50%. “What we need is to depoliticize the relation between gas and the EU,” said Iana Dreyer, an energy issues expert who formerly worked in European think tanks and is now in the Institute Montaigne. According to her analysis, shale gas (in Poland) might have an important role to play in integrating the EU gas market, where is there is marked “capacity underinvestment in transport.” Until the EU market is interconnected and liberalized, as a functioning market with a wider variety of sources, Russia will not feel pressure to reform, even if the EU develops an excellent common energy policy. Making the issue even more complex, if China develops its own shale gas, Russia might lose China as an important market and the EU would remain the only serious market for Russian gas exports. But this is a long-term prospect, and perhaps only a product of wishful thinking of some European analysts and politicians.

**Gazprom**

From their website, “Gazprom’s strategic goal is to become a leader among global energy companies by developing new markets, diversifying business activities and securing the reliability of supplies.” This official quote from the Russian company provides at least one essential insight concerning their overall strategy: they will focus on downstream, pipelines, storage facilities and delivery, not on the development of new fields and
sources. As other entries in this lexicon demonstrate (see "Nord Stream", "South Stream" and “Russia”), gas and pipelines are used as political tools, and economic and business logic does not fully apply to Gazprom. On the other hand, Gazprom has increasingly, at least since 2010, been forced to adapt its traditionally rigid strategy to changing conditions, changing long-term contract conditions with some of its Western customers, decoupling gas prices from oil and connecting them with spot market, which reflects actual price developments. This new flexibility might be used to demonstrate greater differentiation among European customers, as well as to fill Nord Stream pipes and also be flexible in the “political use” of gas deliveries.

**Price of Gas**

The price of the gas was traditionally connected to the price of oil. Moreover, contracts have usually been arranged for the long-term (in 2010 Poland signed a contract with Gazprom for delivery until 2022). In 2011, when the Arab Spring brought rising of oil prices, Russian gas rose accordingly. The most recent trend is leaning toward the disconnection of oil and gas prices, especially when shale gas in the USA has changed the balance in North America. The Polish gas company PGNiG filed suit against Gazprom during the autumn of 2011, based on the fact that Gazprom uses its near monopoly on gas imports to Poland to avoid negotiating lower prices.

**Ecology**

Gas produces roughly half as much carbon dioxide as coal. Therefore, gas is generally considered an environmentally friendly fuel. With shale gas fever spreading to Europe, environmentalists have growing concerns about the impact of its exploration. Conversely, nobody seems to care about the conditions of exploration in Russia. Some countries, like Poland and Hungary, are flirting with the decision of building new gas-fired power stations. For Germany, such power stations will become a necessity due to a diminishing nuclear supply. But according to a majority of studies, gas cannot replace coal in the short and medium term, but might serve as a replacement for nuclear, which is being phased out, or uncertain solar and wind sources. Anyhow, ecological concerns will certainly be raised in debates about shale gas exploration, as the method in question, called fracking or hydrofracking, pumps tons of chemicals into rock layers with the potential to cause small earthquakes or endanger underground water reserves.

**North – South Connection**

According to Václav Bartuška, Czech special envoy for energy security, this is just a "bunch of national projects" and ideas, not a single pipe. Theoretically, it could fill the vacuum of networks that were not built during communism. However, the hub is Baumgarten, Austria. If there are any tubes in the North - South, they lead to Baumgarten. And concerning gas, Austrians are more than friendly to Russians. The solution might be to link Hungary and Slovakia with some significant connection, but a contract has just been signed and there will not be a Slovak-Hungarian tube earlier than 2015. Meanwhile, the Czechs and Poles recently opened a small interconnector in September of 2011.

**Nabucco**

The name of the Old Persian king is generally invoked as if it had miraculous powers in solving the gas problems of Central Europe. In fact, this EU supported project to bring non-Russian gas to the Baumgarten hub through Turkey has been plagued by difficulties from the outset. As the name suggests, it was originally designed to bring Iranian gas to Central Europe, as counterbalance to Russia. But for the moment, Iran is not considered a viable supplier. Therefore, it is hard to devise a business plan: even if you have a tube, you have to have gas to fill it with. Nabucco is therefore on the hunt for non-Russian gas in Central Asia, which is a very daunting task. So far, only the autocratic government of Azerbaijan was able to promise something more or less reliable. Turkmenistan, which could potentially replace the Iran as the major source of gas, is an even more unpredictable dictator. "You should build the pipe to their border and then maybe they will start to discuss the issue seriously," said one EU gas official few years ago. Not to mention the fact that Russia has signed a contract for the import of the majority of Turkmen gas for next twenty years. A solution might involve filling Nabucco with Iraqi gas, which might be complicated due to strained relations between the Kurdish North of Iraq and Turkey.

So while a consortium of six companies is struggling to make Nabucco operational by 2017, Russia is preparing direct competition for Nabucco with the South Stream. This is an even more overtly political project, and given the personal involvement of Vladimir Putin it is likely that Russia will put its entire might into completing the project (for more, see "South Stream"). A final investment decision for Nabucco might be made in 2012. Although it would not bring a critical mass of gas for Central Europe, Nabucco has a chance to become an alternative source, and therefore functions as a symbol of the EU disunity in energy policy. There is not enough political power behind it from Brussels, and much heavier involvement from the USA pushes the project forward.

**Nord Stream**

Put briefly, this is a Russian attempt to work directly with Western partners to force Russian political tools onto Central Europe. Originally German, the Russian project now involves French and Dutch partners. It stands out as one of the successes of Russian bilateral diplomacy, in undermining the formation of a common EU energy policy. The first tube of Nord Stream, opened in 2011 and has not caused too much trouble. However, the planned second and third tubes present serious risks for Central European energy security. Upon completion, Russia would be able to decide to which customer it will send its gas, and as collateral success, strip the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland of transit fees. The most vulnerable of the EU countries is Slovakia.
South Stream

A Slovakian nightmare in Turkish hands. Even if it is not economically viable, it will be built because Vladimir Putin has personally promised its delivery to his Italian and Balkan partners. The entire project depends on Turkey, which refuses to work with the Russians until they build a promised oil pipeline, which could relieve the Bosporus from an overload of tankers. It is direct competition for the EU and US backed Nabucco project. The weak Balkan states tend to side with the Russian position. Hungary has a stake in both Nabucco and the South Stream and has not refused either of the projects. Some experts in Budapest have plans to build a new Central European hub of gas deliveries in Hungary, as direct competition for the Austrian Baumgarten.

So far, this is only a dream. Any eventual realization of the project rests in the hands of the Turkish government, which must support both Nabucco and the South Stream. Turkey wants to become one of the key countries for future gas trade, not simply a transit country. According to the German expert Roland Götz, the South Stream would not be as favorable as for Turkey as originally thought, because Ankara would only collect a transit fee. Revenues for Turkey would be much higher using existing pipes (“shorter version of Nabucco”), buying gas from Central Asia (mainly Azerbaijan) and re-selling it to the EU market.

Vulnerable Hungary

Amongst the the V4 countries, Hungary is the most dependent on gas. It has the highest share of residential consumption, which cannot be disrupted. Therefore, its need to secure the delivery of gas is the highest in the region. This is probably one of the main reasons why the Hungarian government plays all sides when discussing different routes for gas delivery, focusing mainly on the two southern projects, Nabucco and the South Stream. Hungary also has the highest domestic reserves of gas in the V4, and domestic consumption covers around one third of the overall consumption. Hungary is very active in building interconnectors with Romania and Croatia, where it supports the building of a LNG terminal on Krk Island. Under the Hungarian presidency of the EU, there was a breakthrough in February of 2011 when a new EU strategy was adopted, which says that all “energy islands” within the EU must be interconnected by 2015.

Ukraine

From the point of view of gas politics, Ukraine is a black hole. Three years after the infamous crisis, measure stations are still not installed on the entry side into Ukraine (even though the EU invested in this project after the 2009 crisis). Nobody has control on the amount of gas being pumped into Ukraine. Only for the “maintenance of the system”, during last period of each year Russia has imported an amount of gas close to the yearly consumption of the Czech Republic. Yulia Tymoshenko, sometimes portrayed as the last democratic hero of Ukraine, has made her fortune in the shadow gas business. With gas, Russia can hold Ukraine at its mercy, especially when the second and third tube of Nord Stream are open.

Shale Gas in Poland

It has the potential to be a game changer, at least in Central Europe. But there are still several big questions marks. First, will extraction be economically viable? The availability of the Polish shale gas is perhaps half that of the USA, which is so far the only country in the world with a developed unconventional gas industry. Second, will the Polish and American gas lobby be able to defend itself against all kinds of attacks by environmentalists? There are serious doubts that Gazprom would use the entire means at its disposal in Brussels to undermine shale gas in the...
whole European Union. Is there an example of how this might be done? And even the search for shale gas was outlawed in France, due to environmental concerns. Even if energy mix is a national issue, there still might be some push to take care of it on the EU legislative level. Third, if there will be a functioning market with gas in Central Europe (see “North-South Connection” and “Cooperation and Competition”), and the American and Polish companies invest enormous amounts of money into the search and testing of wells, they would need a return on their investment. Estimated reserves are enormous, so a functioning market and infrastructure, not just domestic, but at least on a Central European level would be key for success and further investment, especially if Polish shale gas proved to be more expensive than Russian imports. Fourth, it remains to be seen if Poland is interested enough in having its own gas resources to risk environmental disaster or damage to the countryside. So far, there were only a few demonstrations against the shale gas exploration. Politicians and experts are not as enthusiastic as they were when the possibility emerged two years ago, but the chance to make an energetic (and political) swipe against historical enemies in Russia and Germany is perhaps too tempting not to try. The Polish government wants to resolve the legislative issues surrounding shale gas exploration in 2012, in particular the issue of tax would be very sensitive in making Polish shale gas economically viable (the conservative opposition has spoken about a 40% tax, which would probably kill all interest). Last September at the Economic forum in Krynica, the deputy minister of the state treasury (who has stake in two Polish major energy companies PGNiG and Lotus), now minister, Mikolaj Budzanowski mentioned 2014 as the first year in which Polish shale gas might arrive on the scene. Experts are much more skeptical and are looking at the frame of eight to ten years.

Gas Future

As a concept, energy security was originally tied to gas delivery in Central Europe. Now it is part of a broader discussion about the future of nuclear energy, renewables and coal. The Lisbon Treaty states that energy mix is a national issue. But while the Lisbon Treaty can be reworked to adapt to changing eurozone economic rules, no one has suggested that it can be reopened to formulate new energy rules. Germany is pushing hard for new EU rules on budgetary matters, and with the Greens possibly forming part of a ruling coalition in 2013, a push for clean energy might grow louder. This would include a move to abandon dangerous nuclear and dirty coal-based energy. On the other side, Russia should see an increasingly demanding market and be in search for better income sources for exports. However, investment into new fields will remain almost non-existent, given that foreign companies are not allowed to play according to normal rules in Russia. Unquestionably, gas — and energy in general - will be one of the hottest topics in the future of Central Europe.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

GAS CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES:

➔ transit pipeline from Russia and Slovakia to Germany through Transgas Pipeline
➔ entry points: Lanžhot and Mokrý Háj (with Slovakia), Třanovice (with Poland), Waidhaus, Hora Sv. Kateřiny – Olbernhau and Hora Sv. Kateřiny – Sayda (with Germany)
➔ Waidhaus station connects the Czech network to European network via the MEGAL pipeline

INVESTMENTS IN GAS INFRASTRUCTURE:

➔ construction of Gazela pipeline, connecting Czech Republic with the Nord Stream – start-up: late 2012
➔ development of reverse flow system at Lanžhot and Hora Sv. Kateřiny – Olbernhau
➔ development of existing storage facilities and construction of a new facility
➔ construction of Záhoří – Spáleniště and Břeclav – Reintal gas pipelines to Austria
➔ construction of North-South gas corridor, connecting the Visegrad countries with Romania and Bulgaria, and possibly Balkan states in the future

HIGHLIGHTS:

➔ Czech gas system will be connected to Nord Stream via Gazela Pipeline and German system; storage capability is being expanded

SLOVAKIA

GAS CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES:

➔ transit pipeline from Russia to Czech Republic and Germany through Eustream Pipeline
➔ entry points: Velké Kapušany (with Ukraine), Lanžhot (with Czech Republic), Baumgarten (with Austria)

INVESTMENTS IN GAS INFRASTRUCTURE:

➔ construction of North-South gas corridor, connecting the Visegrad countries with Romania and Bulgaria, and possibly Balkan states in the future - corridor includes the planned Polish-Slovak interconnector
➔ construction of a Slovak-Hungarian interconnection Vecses-Balassagyarmat – start-up: 2015
➔ development of existing storage facilities
➔ deposits of shale gas within Pannonian-Transylvanian Basin

HIGHLIGHTS:

➔ the gas crisis of 2009 demonstrated dependence on gas imports from Russia
POLAND

GAS CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES:

- a transit country between Russia and Western Europe through Yamal Pipeline
- entry points: Lasów (with Germany), Skoczów (with Czech Republic), Drozdowicze (with Ukraine), Wysokoje (with Belarus), Kondratki (with Belarus through Yamal Pipeline)

INVESTMENTS IN GAS INFRASTRUCTURE:

- construction of LNG terminal in Świnoujście – start-up: 2014
- development of Lasów interconnector to increase transmission capacity
- development of existing storage facilities and construction of seven new storage facilities to double storage capacity
- new deposits of unconventional gas, estimated at 1.4 – 3 trillion cubic metres
- BEMIP (Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan) – envisaged to strengthen interconnection between Baltic states, Poland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Germany
- construction of North-South gas corridor, connecting the Visegrad countries with Romania and Bulgaria, and possibly Balkan states in the future – corridor includes the planned Polish-Slovak interconnector

HIGHLIGHTS:

- deposits of shale gas which could cover Poland’s need for 200 years; potential to export gas which can change the landscape of gas geopolitics in the region

HUNGARY

GAS CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES:

- entry points: Mosonmagyaróvár (with Austria), Beregdaróc (with Ukraine), Kiskundorozsma (with Serbia), Csanadpalota (with Romania), Varosfold-Dravaszerdahely (with Croatia), encompassing the connection with Croatian LNG terminal off the coast of the Adriatic Sea (operational by 2014)

INVESTMENTS IN GAS INFRASTRUCTURE:

- construction of South Stream – start-up: 2015
- construction of Nabucco Pipeline – start-up: 2017
- construction of North-South gas corridor, connecting the Visegrad countries with Romania and Bulgaria, and possibly Balkan states in the future
- construction of a Slovak-Hungarian interconnection Vecses-Balassagyarmat – start-up: 2015
- construction of a Hungarian-Slovenian interconnection Nagykanizsa-Tornyiszentmiklos
- deposits of shale gas within Pannonian-Transylvanian Basin

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Hungary aspires to be a new gas intersection and compete with Austrian Baumgarten hub through the construction of Nabucco and South Stream pipelines
Playing the Slovak Piano: New Business Ideas From the New Europe

Interview with Tomáš Bella, CEO of Piano Media, a Slovak internet company which introduced the unique concept of a paywall for media content in Slovakia and recently in Slovenia. Supported by new investments, the company now plans expansion abroad.

Interview conducted by Martin Ehl

Piano Media is a unique project in many ways: it works with internet media, which companies around the world are trying to successfully exploit, embraces the whole country and connects competitors. At the outset, what was the most difficult challenge you faced?

Most difficult was explaining to the first nine Slovak media houses that they should participate in the project, which had never been done before – anywhere in the world. “Where is it working?” was logically one of their first questions. It took a year before I persuaded them that Central Europe could move first, without waiting for the U.S. media or Rupert Murdoch.

Of course, starting Piano Media in the U.S. or Western Europe would be much more difficult. Publishing houses there are much larger, and the decision-making process is slower and more cautious – the risk of the unknown could simply be too large. But we’ve now proven that the concept can work, so negotiations with publishers in other countries are much easier.

How can you persuade readers or consumers of content to pay for articles and videos? What are your arguments?

Media historically needs two sources of revenue to survive: income from advertisements and income directly from consumers (readers). After the Internet arrived, it looked for a moment like this might not be the rule, at least in new media. But today, very few sources of media could survive only on advertisements, and typically these are not the ones most useful for society, with high quality journalism, investigations, or the most interesting opinions. So, either we will have far fewer media outlets in the future, and also less quality journalism, or there will be more media outlets, but not all their content will be free. Piano says: If paying for some media and content is inevitable, let’s try to do that in the way which doesn’t irritate people too much and minimizes the process of payment. We’ve argued that the model of one payment for all content – as with cable TV – is much more comfortable for the readers and viewers and will generate more revenue.

Is your business model somehow specifically geared to the Central European or Visegrad region, or is it global?

Slovakia was from the very beginning a pilot country, a place to prove the viability and potential of the concept. We think there are about 70 countries in which our model could work. The ten biggest media houses in the U.S. and China won’t likely enter Piano, but the basic concept might be adjusted for specific regions or segments of the market, for example media covering one similar topic.
Do you have plans for expansion to other V4 countries? What kind of differences do you see in the media markets of our four countries?

From our point of view, all four countries are quite different. More often they resemble some other country in Western Europe, rather than each other. The Czech Republic is unique, with dominant position of Seznam (search engine) which influences deliberations of all other players in the market. It is also relatively successful with selling online advertisements and the share of space that is sold to advertisers. I’ve even heard that media in the Czech Republic are satisfied with advertisement incomes, and they don’t necessarily need new sources of revenue, a situation which is unheard of in any other European country. The situation in Hungary is precisely the opposite. Media desperately need new revenue, and the political situation is more complicated concerning the influence of politics. Media in the small Slovak market have relatively little money for investment in new products. This was an opportunity for us, because we allowed them to get new sales immediately without any introductory investment. On the other hand, it limits the amount of content and services offered. Poland is again completely the opposite. Media are much larger there, and for them to invest a million euro into their own system is not unimaginable. So we have to be able to explain to them, in very precise terms, why they should work with us. Again, the V4 is an extremely varied region. Also, the experience of our mother companies has shown that the habits of clients are very different. For example, price sensitivity is very different in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In global terms, what or who is your competition? There are some companies offering payment systems. The longest operating is American Press+. But honestly, these “competitors” are rather helpful, as more successful implementations encourage media to become more courageous. At this point, there is enough space in the market for everybody.

With whom do you compare yourself? Who provides your model globally? We mainly study the way the largest media in the world, like The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Financial Times, approached the same problem. Their respective investments into payment schemes are in the tens of millions of dollars. The challenge for us is to achieve the same result with a much lower budget and less exclusive content. For example, the New York Times employs more journalists than all the main Slovak media combined.

Do you have any special recipe for success? I think it would be premature to offer recipes after only half a year of operation.

Why did you pursue such an uncertain project? What was your motivation at the beginning? Our initial deliberations didn’t last long. After the first few minutes of discussion with my colleague Marcel Vaššo, who is now director of one of our mother companies, I strongly felt that we had to give it a try. No matter how small our chances for success would be. It was too good of an idea to keep locked in my head.

When will you consider Piano Media to be a successful project? The biggest achievement would be the moment when the media, thanks to income from Piano, again start to hire journalists, enlarge quality content and provide new services – and when all this is achieved in at least four or five countries.
PENSION SYSTEMS IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP

DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS TO THE SAME PROBLEM?

In terms of social security we changed from optimists to realists. Twenty years of pension reforms in the Visegrad group have taught us that pension systems and reforms remain highly idiosyncratic within the region. For the time being, the Visegrad pension landscape remains as heterogeneous as it has always been. It is the right time to reconsider its prospects.

ONDŘEJ SCHNEIDER

The four countries in the Visegrad Group approached their transitions from centrally planned and state controlled to market oriented economies with different strategies. And even when adopting similar approaches, they rarely did so at the same time. Due to this heterogeneity, we have witnessed a wide range of both successful and failing strategies of transition.

This same pattern holds in the area of pension systems, where the underlying situation in all four countries is quite similar. As fertility rates have collapsed and longevity has increased, these ageing societies have faced increasing pressure pension systems that still bear marks of the former, state dominated systems. They usually provided pensions at relatively early age, heavily taxed labor income, predominantly relied on the state provision of funds, and were used to lower official unemployment by allowing workers to exit the labor force early.

All four Visegrad countries have reacted to the shifting pension landscape with continuous reforms of their respective systems. However, these reforms have greatly differed in their timing, scope and boldness. While Czechs have thus far been the most cautious reformers, they were the first to introduce voluntary pension funds (1994) and increased the retirement age most dramatically. Hungarians were first to completely overhaul their pension system, introducing mandatory pension funds in 1998, only to all but abolish them last year. Poland introduced the most comprehensive pension reform in 1999, but left substantial pockets of the old system in place and did not unify the retirement age for men and women. Slovakia implemented a pension reform in 2005 that was both ambitious in reducing payments to the state run system and timid in reducing future payments, exposing itself to massive future deficits.

AGING – A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON

The dominant obstacle ahead of the pension systems in the Visegrad region is the relentless aging of populations, which is perhaps the most dramatic demographic change in the modern history of the region. Not only is the population getting progressively older, it is also shrinking. The United Nations now estimates that in 2025 there will be 1.6 million fewer Poles than in 2005, 800,000 fewer Hungarians, 500,000 fewer Czechs and 100,000 fewer Slovaks. In relative terms, the population of Hungary is likely to shrink by 8% within 20 years, while the Czech and Polish population will decrease by 5%, and the population of Slovakia will decline 2%. This kind of dramatic depopulation has never occurred during peace times, and it is bound to test the cohesion of each
society in question. Moreover, those living in the region will be much older. The share of elderly, defined as 65 years and older, will rise from 12-14%, in the region overall, to 19% in Slovakia, 21% in Poland, 22% in Hungary and 23% in the Czech Republic. The number of people dependent on retirement pensions will increase at least by one third in Hungary and as much as one half in Slovakia. At the same time, the number of workers contributing to the pension system will decrease by 20-30% in all countries.

All demographic projections are uncertain and the actual numbers of pensioners and contributors to pension systems may change. However, change is unlikely to be either substantial or beneficial for the system. In all the countries, fertility rates have stabilized at well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Immigration represents the only potential upside. However, the main source countries for this immigration – Ukraine and Russia – face even starker decreases in their respective populations and may be expected to take actions against the migration of productive workers. The fall in the number of pension system contributors may be even more pronounced if the Visegrad governments react to pension deficits by pushing up mandatory contributions to the system that would discourage workers from the official labor market and further suppress the number of contributors.

FIRST WAVE OF REFORMS – WHEN WE WERE OPTIMISTS
Visegrad governments were not oblivious to this worrisome pension arithmetic and have repeatedly introduced parametric reforms that typically increased retirement age (for all or specific groups), tightened early retirement schemes, slowed indexation of existing pensions and reduced new pensions by changing the pension formula. With the exception of the Czech Republic, they also implemented a structural pension reform that introduced private pension funds, mandatory for the young and optional for older workers. In 1998, Hungary was first to introduce this three-pillar reform under the auspices of the World Bank. While the reform in Hungary was controversial and opposed by a major political party (which proved lethal 12 years later), the Polish reform of 1999 was a consensual and thorough project that involved all political parties. That reform introduced private pension funds, but it also overhauled the remaining state pension system and built in substantial benefit reductions for future pensioners. However, the reform left pension systems for farmers and uniformed services untouched and maintained a very low retirement age for women. Slovakia followed with similar pension reforms in 2005, implemented by a reformist...
government against the wishes of the opposition. Slovaks went for a very ambitious program, with the highest share of pension contributions diverted to private pension funds. The reform was attacked within years of its conception and the next government made it optional, even allowing workers to withdraw from the pension funds they had previously selected, thereby hampering the performance of the funds.

Despite all uncertainties, pension reforms in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia were popular with workers and the participation rate in all three countries exceeded government estimates. The higher participation rate was promising, as it was expected to decrease future government expenditures on pensions. But while they were more popular than expected, the pension reforms also proved to be more costly. As more workers decided to switch to a new, combined system, the state system was increasingly deprived of contributions. Poland and Slovakia were partially able to reduce the shortfall from privatization revenues, but the Hungarian system’s deficits increased the country’s explicit debt. The Czech Republic chose a different path. It introduced voluntary pension funds as early as 1994, but kept them strictly outside of the mandatory pension system. Pension funds have attracted almost 80% of the active working population, but even contributors, who overwhelmingly saved the minimum amount that allowed them to collect the state subsidy and withdrew all savings immediately upon retirement, have not treated them as part of the pension system. Meanwhile, the state run system has been changed several times, increasing retirement age with – and in this the Czechs are unique – no final retirement age set in the law. Moreover, the pension formula remains very progressive, compressing newly established pensions in a tight range and reducing overall costs of the pension system.

Table 1 summarizes the outlook for the Visegrad pension systems before the last round of reforms (or dismantling of reforms). As demographic factors gradually deteriorate, public pension expenditures are bound to rise, often substantially. The European Commission expected that pension outlays would increase by roughly 3% of GDP in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia between now and 2060. Poland was the outlier, as its public pensions expenditures were expected to decrease by almost 3% of GDP, with the Polish pension reform from 1999, shifting a substantial share of future pension expenditures to the private sector (recent changes in the Polish pension system have, however, substantially reduced the private sector role and the

ECONOMY PENSION SYSTEMS

PENSION REFORMS IN VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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<th>Pension Contributions (% of Wages)</th>
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<th>Pension Contributions to Pension Funds (% of Wages)</th>
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<th>REFORM STARTED</th>
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<th>Retirement age increased, voluntary pension funds planned for 2014</th>
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public sector may be expected to pay higher pensions in the future).

FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008 – TIME FOR RECONSIDERATIONS

The economic crisis that struck the region in late 2008 and 2009 highlighted long neglected fiscal problems in all Visegrad countries. Rising health care expenditures, inefficient tax systems and a sudden drop in tax revenues widened fiscal deficits in all four countries. Hungary, the most vulnerable for a long time running, had to apply for a loan from the EU and IMF in 2009 and remains in an economic downturn. The Polish fiscal deficit quickly ballooned to 8% of GDP, and the government debt is coming dangerously close to the constitutionally set limit of 55% of GDP that would trigger massive spending cuts.

Led by a government that has been long opposed to pension reform, Hungary has acted in ways that have shocked most observers. In 2010, the savings accumulated in pension funds – 10% of GDP in all – were “voluntary” returned to the state pension system, pension funds were dismantled and state dominance in the pension system was re-established. The effects of this “anti-reform” are still difficult to quantify, as the government remains vague as to how exactly it plans to compensate workers for assets nationalized from pension funds. However, it is clear that the public pension expenditures will rise in the future by more than the 3% of GDP estimated in 2009, unless the government implements radical reforms within the state run pension system. Given the country’s worrisome demographic situation, Hungary is at its most exposed since the 1998 referendum.

The Polish reaction to the fiscal problems caused by the financial crisis was more measured, but radical nonetheless. The government reacquired two thirds of contributions that were sent to private pension funds, appropriating some 1% of yearly GDP. The government did not touch the assets of pension funds, but the funds now face a much slower build up of assets, so they will be able to pay lower pensions in the future. What is most important, however, is the uncertainty introduced by the government. It will be under severe fiscal pressure already in 2012 and 2013, and both workers and pension sector cannot be assured that the government will not seize transfers still directed to pension funds.

The changes in the Slovak systems were minor in comparison to Poland and Hungary. The government extended the period during which workers could withdraw from the second pillar and made it voluntary for new labor-market entrants. The Czech Republic, however, reversed regional logic once more. Instead of pulling back from pension reform, in the midst of the financial crisis the government decided to introduce a new kind of private pension fund that would collect a share of workers’ wages, invest them and then eventually pay pensions. The reform is more cautious than previous regional reforms, as it makes participation in the new system entirely voluntary and requires workers to co-invest in pension funds from their private sources.

CONCLUSIONS: ELUSIVE CONVERGENCE ON A UNIVERSAL MODEL

Twenty years of pension reforms in the Visegrad group have taught us that pension systems and reforms remain highly idiosyncratic within the region. Until 2010, the Czech Republic seemed to be an outlier that refused to reform its pension system radically, instead relying on tight management of the state run pension system. While the strategy has mostly succeeded in limiting pension system expenses, it has done so primarily by lowering the benefits of future generations. In this sense, the Czech government’s tentative decision to introduce a partial and voluntary opt-out is long overdue. If implemented, it will make the Czech system similar to that of Slovakia and Poland. The Polish government likewise seems to be moving to this “new standard”, reducing the role of mandatory pension funds and unifying the retirement age for men and women at 67 years.

Before a new universal system could have been established in the Visegrad group, Hungary moved sharply back, demolishing its 12-year-old reform and returning to the system based exclusively on state financing. It remains to be seen whether a future Hungarian government will reverse this move, and thereby return Hungary to the fold of countries with pension systems dominated by the government, but with the private sector playing an important role in providing old-age pensions to their pensioners. For the time being, the Visegrad pension landscape remains as heterogeneous as it has always been.

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LITERATURE

Your political career began as the Ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Hungary in 1990. How and why did you step from the field of literary criticism and academic life into politics?

The end of the eighties paved the way for a more critical reaction to politics, culture and the state of the society. For example, we took our job quite seriously within the editorial offices of the literary review Slovenské pohľady (The Slovak View), which I led from 1988–1989. It was as if we were unknowingly preparing for democratic changes, the dimensions of which we didn’t even have the faintest idea about. As a consequence of the geopolitical turmoil, the changes, so to speak, were handed to us on a plate. The first period of transformation was led by many intellectuals who were, unfortunately, gradually replaced by pragmatic people and those who took advantage of politics for low-minded personal goals. I entered into public life as an intellectual and researcher in literature. In the spring of 1990, I received an offer to take up the post of Ambassador of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in Hungary. Since my career had been dedicated to researching Hungarian and Hungarian–Slovak literature and cultural relations, the offer was attractive to me. In June of 1990, I handed the credentials signed by then President Václav Havel over to the Hungarian President, Árpád Göncz, an old friend of mine. I was regularly involved in internal affairs, mainly as it related to discussions of Slovakia’s half-million ethnic Hungarians. After the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, I returned from Budapest and devoted myself to my work at the university and the academy. I also became involved in the NGO sector, which fought a battle with the undemocratic regime of Vladimír Mečiar and helped to defeat him in the elections of 1998. I accepted the position of Minister of Culture for four years, beginning in 2002, and in 2010 I took on the role of Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and National Minorities. Both positions, of course, could demobilize an intellectual to a certain extent. Still, the post of Ambassador made it possible to think more freely. At least, in those days it did.

Would you describe how those times differed? How political diplomacy look in relation to today?

Arriving in Budapest in the summer of 1990, I somehow thought that the freedom of democracy would create an oasis of mutual cooperation in our post-communist region – that democracy and freedom could oppress national and state egoism in the name of fulfillment of the European vision of integration. It took a couple of months to recover from my illusions, in spite of the fact that the idea of European integration remained a tangible topic. Relations between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and Hungary started to swiftly deteriorate because of differing interpretations of certain central issues, especially the situation of the ethnic Hungarian mi-
Interview Rudolf Chmel

InterVIEW Rudolf ChMel

Austrian review

I remember when a group of Slovak writers and intellectuals continued to work even when the conditions for it were nonexistent. The phenomenon mainly developed in exile and in samizdat literature. It was connected with the polemical contemplation of Milan Kundera. The discussion about the main ideas of the dissident communities, it passed almost unnoticed. Though there had been discourse on collaboration within the dissident communities, it passed almost unnoticed. This was mainly from the mid-eighties, in connection with the polemical contemplation of Milan Kundera. The discussion about the kidnapping or tragedy of Central Europe inspired by Kundera went on mainly in exile and in samizdat literature. Domestically there were no conditions for it. The phenomenon of Central Europe created only the slightest stir in Slovakia. I remember when a group of Slovak writers and intellectuals, including myself, agreed on cooperation in 1988 with the Austrian review Pannonia – edited by György Sebestyén, chairman of the Austrian Pen-club, who had fled Hungary after 1956. The communist authorities and ideologues suspected us of trying to revitalize the Austro-Hungarian monarchy! According to them, Europe and even the world should have been permanently divided into East and West. Central Europe meant putting an end to this bipolarity for them, an overturning of the Cold War’s idyll. In a slightly figurative sense, it meant the loss of their job.

In such circumstances, how did the idea of V-4 cooperation develop and what was the role of the idea of “Central Europe”? During the Velvet Revolution at the end of the eighties, it was time to think about a new project for this region and to integrate East-Central Europe into the existing structures. At that time, the fundamentals started to shake in Yugoslavia and its bloody continuation served as a memento mori for the West. The tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations rose from 1992, the last year of the existence of Czechoslovakia. It posed the real threat of an ethnic explosion, at least in the mind of the West. Just the concept of creating the Visegrad Group, the V-3 in February 1991, aimed for a kind of post-communist nationalism in Central Europe. This endeavor sought to lead Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland into the united Europe. In this way, it was a trial-run, testing their ability to communicate and cooperate in a smaller community. As a matter of fact, concerning the transformation process in Central Europe – especially in the face of the crisis in Yugoslavia and Soviet Union – the West didn’t have a clear political strategy. Importantly, there was no strategy to overcome the historical traumas of Central Europe, which was often the reason behind conflicts that were cyclically repeated in our region. In principle, this is because “ethnocracy” and “natiocracy” goes beyond democracy in some states, even today. It is good that the V4 lived to twenty, even if, to be critical, the group was unable to unite these countries into a compact political and economic unit. The blame first of all lies with the Hungarians and Slovaks for their non-cooperation. But early on, the collaboration was ignored by, the then Czech premier, Václav Klaus.

Looking at the twenty years of the V4 cooperation, 2004 seemed to be a turning point, when its members achieved EU accession – the original goal of the organization. How do you see the story of the Visegrad Group? The story of the V4 has perhaps two culminations. The first is connected with its establishment, but it was always partially independent of its participants. It operated as a life-belt, to be more punctual, a starting block on the way to an integrated Europe. The second culmination, entering the EU and NATO, involved the cooperation of all four states based on standard stereotypes. Nobody posed the questions about the geopolitical or geostrategic identity of the region anymore. The Visegrad countries gradually and quietly gave Visegrad up as a lost cause. Perhaps the Polish remained the most faithful to the group’s principles. And also there was a period, between 1994-1999, when the idea of Visegrad was kept alive only by the intellectuals gathered around the Central European Journal, a common supplement to the daily papers of the Slovak Sme, Polish Gazeta Wyborcza, Czech Lidové noviny and the Hungarian Magyar Hirlap and Népszava. Polish initiative was also dominant in this respect. The twenty year history of the Visegrad has had its ups and downs. It doesn’t need to be put on life support yet, but I suspect we’re close to that stage. It needs some impulse, a leader, who would give it new meaning. The characteristic routine for Visegrad doesn’t justify its existence. The politicians missed the opportunity and the intellectuals got exhausted and gave up.

Yet the question of national minorities remains significant, despite some expectations that inside it would cease to be a hot issue within the EU. How do you see this, particularly in light of the V4 cooperation? The question of minorities, emerging due to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and then after 1993 due to Slovakia, was one of the problems that irritated and worsened the cooperation of the V4. When, in summer of 1990, the Hungarian premier József Antall proclaimed an apparently innocent sentence, that he wished to serve in spirit as the prime minister of fifteen million – instead of ten million – Hungarians, raising the issue of Hungarians living in successor or post-Trianon states, this question became very important in bilateral and multilateral relations within the Visegrad states. At present, Viktor Orbán, Antall’s political heir, raised this question to another level, which has frozen not only Slovak-Hungarian relations but also Visegrad cooperation. This is a counter-productive component of the Visegrad story. In short, cooperation within the Visegrad is formal, cold and ritualistic. Unfortunately, this is not an optimistic conclusion, but a realistic one. This perhaps because we feel the absence of true statesmen, like the late Václav Havel, in our region. Contrary to the politicians who just reproduce themselves and live for election outcomes. In such a way, they are merely devoted to populism. /
Jindřich Štreit
from the collection Chlěvská žněka
Countries of Central Europe do not have a common response to the economic and financial crisis. They have revealed certain differences marked by a split between two political cultures: a “sovereignist” and a “pro-European” pole. However, it is in the best interest of Central Europe to do everything to save the European project by being engaged in building a new Europe.
Struck by the euro crisis, Central Europe remains far from united. And indeed, the impact of the financial and economic crisis on the region differs from country to country, as do the perceptions of its stakes and preferred responses. Poland is the only EU country to have passed through the international crisis without falling into recession, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia have managed to sustain only limited damage. By contrast, Hungary has felt the full brunt of it. In the Baltics, Estonia adapted quickly and managed to get going again, whereas Latvia introduced unprecedented austerity measures. The first attempt to coordinate positions was the meeting of the Visegrad Countries at the end of February of 2009, just before a European summit during the Czech presidency. The Prime Minister of Hungary called for a European rescue plan to avoid an “economic Yalta” in Europe. His Czech counterpart categorically refused this idea, precisely because such a rescue plan could be interpreted as substantiating the idea of a continually divided Europe, with an Eastern Europe within the EU. The then Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, went even further, stating that the Slovak “situation is a thousand times better than that of Hungary”. His formulation reflects the absence of solidarity among Central European countries, a fact which is hard to understand unless one knows that for a thousand years Slovakia was a province of Hungary, whose kings were crowned in Pozsony, also known as Presbourg, but not yet Bratislava.

However, there are certain common features in the way the region is facing the crisis, summarized as follows: contrary to common misconceptions, Central European countries have weathered the crisis better than the rest of the EU. In the midst of the crisis, the election year of 2010 witnessed the emergence of liberal and/or conservative right-wing coalition governments (the case of Hungary must be treated separately). In response to the crisis, these countries felt closer to German discipline than to French fiscal policy, not tolerating the budgetary laxness attributed to Southern European countries. Europe is now split between North and South rather than East and West. In the face of the financial crisis, “we belong to Northern Europe”, as Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs declared. Perhaps most importantly, the Visegrad countries feared that the French and Germans would close ranks and impose their own solutions, taking steps toward the creation of an “inner core” and a two-speed Europe.

Among those who have adopted the euro, Slovenia and Estonia (a country which took the risk of joining the eurozone in the midst of the crisis) are complying with the new pressures without faltering. Slovakia has refused to change the rules mid-game for a disputable cause (the collapse of Greece). At the end of the European summit on the 8th and 9th of December 2011, Poland supported the proposals, whereas the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán first rallied behind the British veto but then changed his mind and, like the Czechs, supported the Swedish position, namely prior approval by the national parliaments.

The differences between individual countries partly explain contrasting perceptions and reactions to the euro crisis, as well as the speculations regarding the future of the European project in general. One can also see these events in terms of political lessons that the respective countries of the region have learned from the crisis of the European currency.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC: A LESSON IN SELF-IMPORTANCE AND PRAGMATISM

“The euro was never a good idea. It was bound to fail.” The declaration by the President of the Czech Republic in November of 2011 also contained a reminder: “I told you so.” As a matter of fact, it must be admitted that Václav Klaus’s opposition to the idea of the single currency dates back to the very day of its introduction. He agreed with the observations of the British ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, who considers the monetary union “the most irresponsible experiment of the post-war era”. Václav Klaus, an economist by training, also considers disintegration preferable to ongoing rescue attempts: a fiscal Europe or a redistributive Europe is a dead end that leads to an economy managed in the same way as “communism tried to
manage it. And we know that there was no light at the end of the communist tunnel and we had to exit that tunnel. The euro is a financial failure, but it is more than that: the crisis reveals its dangerous logic that threatens the nation-state and democracy. On the occasion of the publication of his new book, “Europe Without Illusions”, the Czech President gave an interview on the title page of Lidové Noviny with the title “We Are Governed by Sarkozy and Merkel”.15

President Klaus was exaggerating, but he represents the rejection of the dominant French-German couple and drives the agenda of Czech media, which tends to take up his favorite topics in articles on “euro slavery” (in relation to Europe’s plan to rescue Greece)6 or on “second-class members”:7 In other words, we are relieved that we are not included, but frustrated that we cannot participate in decisions concerning the future, which is the common fate of the European Union.

Without the counterweight of his main political rival Václav Havel, whose Euro-federalist speeches have always had more resonance outside than inside the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus sets the tone in Prague. There are two main currents on the Czech political scene. On the one hand, the ODS, the rightist-conservative party of Prime Minister Petr Necas, has adopted a souverainist position, arguing for less integration. Faithful to its British model, the ODS left the EPP in the European Parliament and established an uncompromising group of Euro-sceptics with the British Conservatives and Polish PiS, led by the Kaczyński brothers. According to Jana Černochová, an MP from ODS: “the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) is exactly the free association of states that suits us.”8 At its October of 2011 meeting, the congress of the ODS voted unanimously for a referendum on the possible adoption of the euro. Let’s not forget that the referendum held in June of 2003 on the accession of the country to the EU included the obligation, in principle, to join the European currency. The argument raised against adoption concerns ongoing changes in the management of the eurozone. Alexandr Vondra, an ex-dissident but now the Minister of Defense, declared to the congress that the current crisis was caused by “the permanent heterogeneity of the national traditions, cultures and economies of Europe, on which a false solidarity has all too often been imposed”.

In the present turmoil he urges for national cohesion first of all: “The concepts of multiculturalism are worthless today. On the contrary, the word ‘homeland’ should not be considered a dirty word, but a value that is worth defending and for which we must be ready to suffer.”9

The other—more European—position is defended by the social democratic opposition, but also by the party of Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, TOP (Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity) within the governing coalition. As minister of foreign affairs, he declared that holding a referendum on the euro amounted to turning their backs on their European partners. His colleague, the Finance Minister, Miroslav Kalousek developed the argument further: a two-speed Europe seems to be taking shape, which is “contrary to the interests of the Czech Republic”, a country which, as opposed to Britain with its City, hub of international finance, Switzerland with its banks or Norway with its gas, cannot allow itself to step away from European integration.

In this way, the European question divides the government parties and it is not impossible (if the crisis continues) to imagine that this split may anticipate the breakup of a coalition already undermined by corruption cases,10 and the development of closer ties between “pro-Europeans” among the social democrats and the liberal conservatives of TOP. Is the European crisis a new faultline reordering Czech internal politics?

SLOVAKIA: A LESSON IN ACCOUNTING
It is an irony of history that Slovakia, a country that participated in the dissolution of their common currency with the Czechs less than twenty years ago, joined the European monetary union in January 2008 – just before the outbreak of the euro crisis. This occurred under the government of Robert Fico and his left-wing SMER party. The Greek crisis coincided with elections in Slovakia in the spring of 2010 and the ascendancy to power of a liberal-conservative coalition, whose leaders had promised not to bail out bankrupt countries with Slovak taxpayers’ money. The argument of Iveta Radicova, a sociologist by training who became prime minister in the beginning of the summer of 2010, was the following: Slovakia is poorer than Greece. The average salary (780 euros) is equivalent to the minimum wage in Greece. Over the last decade, Slovakia implemented a series of brave and unpopular reforms (labor market, pensions and healthcare) to control public spending in order to fulfill the criteria for euro entry. Only to realize that it should, according to the agreement of July, 2011, contribute considerable sums (equivalent to half of the revenue in its budget) to rescuing a country that has been a large recipient of European funds for thirty years, and decided to ignore these aforementioned criteria and falsify its public finances.

Under these conditions, it was not easy for Slovak government parties to go back on what they constantly repeated during the campaign. Stuck between pressure from Europe and mostly hostile domestic reactions, Mrs. Radicova’s government was finally divided between those who, in her words, are for “no European funds, no guarantees, no aid and letting the crisis sort itself out” and the other position, according to which “we have obligations, we belong to the eurozone, we are responsible and we cannot accept the advantages without sharing the problems”.11 Richard Sulik defended the first position (“we will not give another cent”). He founded the liberal-conservative party Liberty and Solidarity (SaS) a few months before the 2010 elections. His party refused to approve the Slovak contribution to the European Financial Stability Fund, which resulted in the fall of the government and the announcement of early elections (at the time, only the opposition party SMER voted in favor of contributions to the European funds). Thus, the Slovak government was one of the numerous victims of the euro crisis. And this was an eye opener: Greece had been admitted to the eurozone for political reasons (the support of France), before it was economically, financially and institutionally ready.12 Slovakia, on the other hand, had shown that it was well prepared economically and financially, but unprepared politically.

HUNGARY: A LESSON IN HUMILITY
After the landslide victory of his party in the spring of 2010, Fidesz received two thirds of parliamentary seats. Viktor Orbán immediately announced his intention to free the country from financial dependence on foreign powers, namely the International Monetary Fund and the European Union: “Neither the IMF nor the financial leaders of the
EU are our bosses and we are not their underlings”. In fact, from the outset of the crisis in 2008, the former (socialist) government obtained a loan of 20 billion dollars from the IMF with European support. In order to shake off this legacy, the Orbán government implemented a series of radical measures, directly attacking the interests of bankers and foreign investors. He refused the last installment of the IMF loan, re-nationalized private pension funds and levied taxes on banks and certain multinational companies. He also promised to fix the exchange rate between the Hungarian forint and the Swiss franc (1 Swiss franc for 180 forints), so that Hungarian citizens could repay their mortgages. In 2008, the rate was around 140 forints; today it is 263 forints per Swiss franc. Banks, mainly Austrian, were concerned that they would have to make up the difference between the rate recommended by Orbán and that recommended by the market. The government also set out to investigate the origin of loans in foreign currency. This brutal intervention created distrust in financial circles, and sparked Austrian and German protests that were relayed by the EU Commission.

While it held the EU presidency in the first half of 2011, a new constitution was adopted in Hungary in April of 2011 that strengthened the power of the executive branch to the detriment of the separation of powers, intermediary bodies and politically “neutral” bodies (the Central Bank, the State Audit Office and especially the Constitutional Court, whose members are appointed by the Fidesz government). More than two hundred laws were enacted within a year and a half, starting with a repressive law aimed at the media. Although it was amended after being criticized by the European Commission, the law still forces compliance, especially on public media. An attempt has also been made to strengthen control over the judiciary by forcing early retirement on more than two hundred judges and replacing them with young people close to Fidesz, ready to implement retroactive justice against leaders of the socialist party, supposedly responsible for the wrongdoings of the communist era. While he wants to break with the communist past, Orbán reaches back to the nationalist and authoritarian Hungary of the Horthy era (1920–45). This double talk about breaking with communism on the one hand and embracing the frustrated nationalism of the inter-war period are strongly connected to Orbán’s political and economic sovereignty, who is overly banking on internal polarization and a defiance towards foreign financial institutions.

However, the latter are taking their revenge. Orbán, who refused to be dependent on international financial organizations, and did so with great histrionics, has now been forced by the deterioration of the financial situation to make an about-face and call the IMF for help. Standard & Poor’s downgraded the country to BBA- in November of 2011. And Hungarian debt is currently sold with an interest rate of 9.4% (the highest in Europe after Greece), while the forint has lost 20% of its value during the last quarter of 2011. Moreover, there has been a continuous flight of capital toward neighboring Austria. Cornered, Orbán was forced to propose “a new type of cooperation” to the IMF, seeking to reassure the EU, without whose blessing no IMF loan will be granted. Politically, the EU has not done much to counter the authoritarian tendencies in Hungary. It is the economic lever that seems most efficient for Brussels to bring Orbán back to the harsh realities of European constraints – in short, economic rather than democratic pressure is being applied.

Philip Roth’s latest novel is entitled The Humbling (the title is imperfectly rendered in French as Le Rabaissement). What we have witnessed with Hungary is a lesson in humility for someone who wanted to take back his nation’s sovereignty.

Poland: a Lesson in Europeanness

Poland is exceptional in the region, both in the performance of its economy and in its ambition to become, at a time when the euro crisis looms large, an important European player. For its neighbors, the crisis is first of all a threat. For Poland, it has been an occasion to take responsibility and formulate a response to the European challenge. The first noteworthy feature of Poland is strong growth, sustained even during the crisis (3.8% in 2010 with a similar number expected for 2011). The second specific feature is the re-election of the liberal Civic Platform (PO) government in the October 2011 elections. Everywhere else, voters were all too happy to eliminate outgoing governments, deemed responsible for the crisis. The centrist-right government of Donald Tusk had no serious opposition on the left and stood his ground well in the campaign against Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS). The country modernized during the last twenty years. It is listed among the “highly developed” countries in the UN Human Development Index, and has moved up ten positions between 2007 and 2011 in the Global Competitiveness Index of the World Bank, positioning itself as a major actor on the European scene.

The fact that Poland is an exception, in a double sense, partly explains the attitude of the country toward the euro crisis. Polish leaders know that it is in the best interest of a country that conducts three quarters of its trade with the European Union and owes 40% of its GDP to export to Germany to assure that the euro and the European project survive. Even if the Polish EU presidency voiced concerns about the way the big countries of the eurozone bypassed European institutions in making some decisions, the reactions of Polish officials betrayed neither Schadenfreude (in the style of Václav Klaus), nor a wait-and-see policy (“let them manage as best they can”), nor even a temptation to take advantage of the situation and get on with the project of reconstruction (in the manner of Cameron).

The way Poland thinks about the euro crisis and its role in the matter is best illustrated by a speech given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radek Sikorski, in Berlin at the end of November of 2011. It is surely the most important speech given by a minister of foreign affairs of a Central-Eastern European country in the last twenty years. After reminding the audience that the enlargement of the European Union had nothing to do with the crisis (of course!), the Polish minister hit his central point:

We have a Europe with a dominant currency but no single Treasury to enforce it. We have joint borders without a common migration policy. We are supposed to have a common foreign policy, but it is divorced from real instruments of power and often weakened by member states cutting their own deals. The breakup of the euro would trigger “a crisis of apocalyptic proportions”, which would affect the single market and the foundations of the Union. If we refuse to risk a partial dismantling of the Union, then the choice will be, as for all
federations: “deeper integration or collapse? The European Central Bank must become lender of last resort, the Commission should have more power and less commissioners. He also reminded Britain (traditionally a reference country for Polish governments in the 1990s on European questions) that their accumulated debt (sovereign, corporate and household) exceeds 400% of their GDP, and that they have neither lessons to give nor valid reasons to prevent further integration: “If you can’t join us, please allow us to forge ahead”. Finally, the Polish minister addressed Germany that he called “the biggest beneficiary of the current arrangements” and therefore the country that has the biggest obligation to make them sustainable. He ended by declaring: “The biggest threat to the security and prosperity of Poland would be the collapse of the eurozone”. And then, an extraordinary thing to say for a Polish politician:

_I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inactivity. You have become Europe’s indispensable nation. You may not fail to lead. Not dominate, but to lead in reform._

At a moment when, through inattention, Sarkozy and Merkel are moving forward in fits and starts towards a federalism dictated by the necessity to manage the financial crisis, it is the minister of a European state, who knows better than others what it means to regain national sovereignty, who has provided a real lesson in Europeanness to the founding countries that seem to have forgotten the basics. The Weimar triangle - France, Germany and Poland - has been looking for a long time for a _raison d’être_. The Polish response to the crisis suggests that it is there, and that the framework of a future Europe can and should be delineated.

The economic and financial crisis that started in 2008 has shown us that the countries of Central Europe do not have a common response. The current crisis of the euro, with its explicit political stakes for the future of the building of Europe, reveals contrasting perceptions related to different ways of thinking about the nation-state and the European project. The issue of the European crisis has revealed profound divisions on the internal political scene, but also certain differences between the new EU members, marked by a split between two political cultures: a “sovereignist” and a “pro-European” pole. Slovakia is part of the eurozone and seems to regret it, but is compelled to follow suit. Viktor Orbán’s Hungary is not part of the eurozone and shows determination in “regaining sovereignty” – only to quickly realize its limitations. The most striking contrast is between the Czech Republic and Poland in facing a European core that is taking shape around the eurozone: the former is visibly relieved not to be part of it, even at the risk of missing the train of the next big step in European integration and finding itself relegated to a second circle of the EU. By contrast, Poland, even though it is strongly attached to its sovereignty for historical reasons, and even though it is not a member of the eurozone, behaves as if it was and urges a “great leap forward” into federalism. Poland has understood that it was in the best interest of Central Europe to do everything to save the European project, which implies behaving not as a peripheral state and a mere spectator of the crisis, but as an actor belonging to the core that is engaged in building a new Europe.

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The astonishing similarity between Slovakia and Czech Republic is likely to prompt an outside observer to ask a logical question: what, in that case, was the point of the separation? The answer is simple. The secret of national identity is in the details that escape an outside observer. They are numerous and their causes are varied, ranging from the historical and psychological to random phenomena that may have the appearance of historicity but often stem from quite banal causes. We present a provocative analysis of causes and consequences of the Czechoslovak split.
turned by furious nationalists and his bodyguards barely managed to get him out of harm’s way. Twenty years later, opinion polls show that the majority of Slovaks have a positive view of Havel, whereas barely 16% today respect the once idolized Vladimír Mečiar, who became the “founding father” of independent Slovakia in 1992.

What could explain this paradox? Václav Havel seems to have represented something more powerful than the idea of the state. While still alive, he seemed to provide a guarantee that existential evil would be reined in. When he died, both Czechs and Slovaks mourned him because this guarantee was gone. Now they have to weather the full force of the economic crisis, drowning in the quagmire of corruption, at the mercy of politicians they despise and trying in vain to articulate and understand why the developments of the past twenty years have left them so frustrated.

In a great historical irony, the two nations split in 1992 so that they could go their separate ways, yet ended up treading the same path. They have followed what the other has been doing, sometimes in jealousy or competition, but mostly they have behaved as good friends. The world ice hockey championships are a classic example of this strange relationship: whenever the two teams play each other, each nation zealously roots for its own players, but the minute one of the teams gets knocked out, their fans immediately and with the same fervent enthusiasm, adopt the side that has managed to stay in the competition.

The astonishing similarity between these two countries, their nature and development, is likely to prompt an outside observer to ask a logical question: what, in that case, was the point of the separation? The answer is simple. The secret of national identity is in the details that make it truly different. The two languages, indistinguishable to a foreigner, represent two independent entities in my brain. Czech, historically more ancient and rich, is aggressive and domineering, it conquers the author while ingratiating itself with him. Words seem to rush to the lips of their own accord, and listening to Czechs speak you feel they are literally reveling in their language and don’t know when to stop. This is a feeling with which I am intimately familiar: even if you lack any ideas, Czech allows you to spout meaningless nonsense or lies, and still give the impression of speaking wisely and truthfully – that’s how enthralling Czech is. It has the enormous advantage of a formalized division between the so-called common (colloquial) and the standard Czech, both versions of which are acceptable in writing, if necessary. The richness of the Czech language, however, sometimes more of an obstacle than an advantage, and does not make it any easier in and of itself to understand national identity. Havel was right when he bitterly remarked, “talk of Czech national identity often doesn’t go beyond mere chatter”.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Czechoslovakia had to split was the fact that the Slovaks felt humiliated by the verbal dominance of Czech politicians, who spoke seemingly rationally but misused their language to suppress the budding Slovak longing for equal rights. Even Václav Havel, one of the few people capable of molding the Czech language into a beautiful shape, took far too long to understand the urgency of this Slovak longing.

Slovak is soft and melodious and you can tell Slovak women by their voices, which are higher and more delicate. It is humble, yet it doesn’t let itself be violated. Of course, you can lie and talk nonsense in Slovak too. But thanks to the sobriety of the language you are soon found out, and your words turn into embarrassing drivel. Lacking a written colloquial form like Czech, Slovak imposes discipline and accuracy on the speaker. All attempts to introduce regional vernacular (almost non-existent in Czech) into the language have failed since they were more reminiscent of textbooks on folk culture than of fiction, while urban slang has not yet taken root, since it is developing at such a furious pace that its expressions age within a few years.

One of the reasons I wrote this text in Slovak was to make sure I didn’t delude myself. Similar profound and historically conditioned differences apply to attitudes and to nature. My Czech parents loved Czech spruce forests and my mother was always particularly happy on our mountain hikes to see them so “tidy”. This is because the Czechs regard nature as part of their human world and demand that it be humble. They had eradicated all their bears and wolves by the 19th century. They keep the remaining animals for meeting, such as deer, in enclosed areas they have dubbed “reserves”. Not even the most ardent Czech environmentalists find these enclosures for wild animals perverted in any way, and they were surprised when I explained that a similar practice would be unimaginable in Slovakia.

By contrast, the Slovaks regard nature as a separate, independent world that belongs to animals and is dangerous. Nowhere in the Czech Republic will you find a place where nature poses a threat to your life, whereas in Slovakia it is enough to venture a kilometer out of a village or a city to find yourself in deep woods where the bear is king. This mixture of respect and fear may also be one of the reasons why the Slovaks are more aware of their own parochialism, of being limited by other worlds, and why, despite their proverbial emotuality, they are much more realistic than the Czechs. Living in deep valleys surrounded by menacing mountains has made them understand their lot of being on the periphery and being able to survive only through loyalty to a distant center of power. This loyalty is the destiny of a small state on the margin of the European Union, whose center is located far to the west. That is one of
the reasons why they have adopted the euro and have done their damndest to prove themselves a reliable member of the European community. Unlike Václav Havel, most Czechs, evoking the Hussite tradition of rebellion, have not realized they are just as parochial as the Slovaks and have behaved like the Brits, living on an imaginary island they created in their own image having expelled everyone who threatened to ruin it, from bears and wolves to the Sudeten Germans. This is why they are among the most ardent opponents of the European Union into which Havel pushed them.

The number of these historical differences is greater than I used to admit, in my reluctance to accept the existence of a "national character", a concept that smacks of nationalism. Presumably, Václav Havel did not admit these differences existed either, as they ran counter to his notion of a universal essence of our being.

Even now, I feel as if I were venturing into forbidden territory. Yet who else, if not me, is entitled to compare Czechs and Slovaks without falling under the suspicion of favoring one or the other?

Before the funeral, something quite characteristic happened when we – Havel’s ten Slovak friends – dropped in at a café near the Prague castle for a coffee and a shot: one of us picked up the whole tab and we all said thank you. This is something I’ve hardly ever experienced with my Czech friends, and although Czech pubs are famed for their cozy atmosphere, everyone typically pays only for themselves.

This difference in the attitude to money and its role in life is widely known, and the Slovaks regard the Czechs as penny-pinching scrooges. Yet statistics show that Czechs contribute more to charity than Slovaks. The fact is that the Czech attitude to money is just another expression of their profound faith in the functional essence of civilization, based on a rational organization of society (without God). And the Czechs’ ability to organize their life and the country can be astonishing. The country is interspersed with a dense network of roads and you rarely walk for more than three kilometers before reaching a village. In Slovakia by contrast, which is significantly smaller, you might wander for many miles in the mountains and not come across a living soul, let alone a village. Compared to Slovakia, I am always stunned at how perfectly everything works in the Czech Republic. It was no accident that the economy kept running smoothly in 2006, when the Czech Republic had no legitimate government for six months.

Nevertheless, there is one thing, quite unusual for Central Europe, which the Slovaks and Czechs have in common, in spite of the obvious difference in their attitude to money. Their experience from the 1920s, when Czechoslovakia was famous for its strong currency, has instilled in them the idea of strict fiscal discipline that is regarded as the government’s historic obligation. It is no coincidence that Czechoslovakia’s communist regime – unlike those of Poland and Hungary – left very little debt behind. Similarly, no prime minister since 1989, Czech or Slovak, has dared to increase debt beyond a reasonable level. However, the Czech skill in organizing society also entails some risks, including the fact that they do not feel a strong need for reform.

Twenty years of independent development have brought about a surprising phenomenon: institutionally, Slovakia is a more modern state than the Czech Republic. While the reasons for this development seem to be accidental, there is logic to it. In order to survive, Slovakia, with its traditionally less efficiently organized society, full of internal contradictions, needed better governance than the Czech Republic. The Slovaks experienced this first hand during the six years it took to get rid of the authoritarian Mečiar, who brought the country to the brink of collapse. The Czechs, on the other hand, enjoyed a seemingly ideal transition to democracy and capitalism in the 1990s and are only now beginning to realize how right Havel was to criticize “Mafia capitalism”.

In terms of their institutions, the two countries had the same base line, as Slovakia has literally inherited most of the original constitution adopted before Czechoslovakia split. However, following Mečiar’s fall, enormous changes took place in Slovakia’s political system. Unlike the Czechs the Slovaks can now elect their mayors (as well as the President) by direct vote, which has curtailed the excessive power of political parties. The country has been more profoundly decentralized and the prosecutor’s office has been separated from the executive (the Prosecutor General is elected by the parliament, whereas in the Czech Republic he is appointed by the government).

In the fight against corruption, Slovakia puts greater emphasis on transparency: all state contracts with private companies have to be published on the Internet and for the past ten years, anonymous firms have been banned from trading their stocks. In the Czech Republic, most companies that are awarded state tenders still have undisclosed owners, many of whom are undoubtedly politicians.

In Slovakia, the fight against the grey economy has even managed to override the aforementioned relaxed attitude to money. In a Czech pub a waiter will typically add up your bill on a scrap of paper, and you have to rely on his math skills. On the other hand, even in the most remote corner of Slovakia, if you order a beer you will receive a proper receipt from an electronic cash register. The Slovaks introduced these registers ten years ago as part of the fight against tax evasion while the Czechs still keep making excuses, claiming this form of oversight is too expensive.

I could list many similar examples, but the fact remains that most of them ensure a better democratic framework in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. So why is the extent of corruption actually roughly the same in both countries, and people are equally convinced that the system is unjust? It’s simply because the Czechs make up for the lower quality of their legislation with higher quality among their elites. For example, the Czech judiciary, which is in principle less dependent on politicians than its Slovak counterpart, enjoys a better reputation due to the judges’ strong personalities. By comparison, Slovak judges have abused their independence to create a closed and deeply corrupt edifice.

The differences in the development of political systems, and their reflection in such trivial matters as electronic cash registers, are evidently the result of larger social processes and to examine them would provide material for several books. But there are also other differences, whose causes may at first sight seem quite banal. Every time I go to buy a newspaper or cigarettes in the Czech Republic, I notice that I can look the man or the woman in the kiosk in the eye and we sometimes exchange a few words, even though we don’t know each other at all. It’s because the Czech newspaper kiosks resemble little houses with a huge open window from which the salesperson observes the world and
tries to attract customers. In Slovakia, by contrast, they hunker in their dark kiosks, hidden behind glass with a small opening through which an impersonal hand pushes the newspaper and takes your money. Is this striking dissimilarity a sign of cultural differences or an accidental circumstance? I’m not sure. The only obvious reason is the fact that in the 1990s the newspaper distribution monopoly in Slovakia was seized by a Mafia entrepreneur who flooded the country with standardized kiosks turning them into armored fortresses, as befitting his own character. In the Czech Republic, the distribution of newspapers was subject to fierce competition, which created a model responsive to the needs of customers.

However, the reasons for this strange difference may go deeper. While it is true that the newspaper kiosk is a shared legacy of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, when war veterans were rewarded with the right to build small kiosks for selling newspapers and tobacco to make a living, in the Czech lands the kiosk became something of a national institution (although in Prague they are now mostly run by Russians). The operation has never taken deep root in Slovakia, partly because the first decent Slovak newspapers did not appear until the 20th century. To this day, there is a dramatic difference between the circulation of Slovak and Czech periodicals. Although there are almost exactly twice as many Czechs as Slovaks, the newspaper market in the Czech Republic is four times larger than in Slovakia. It is, therefore, quite possible that the pleasant openness of Czech kiosks is a reflection of a significant cultural difference, rather than the mere reflection of the character of a single Slovak entrepreneur.

In spite of these and many other differences, after twenty years of development the two countries have reached, via a number of detours, a stage when they are the spitting image of each other – especially when observed from a Central European perspective. I am also puzzled by this and put it down, among other things, to historical circumstance. The fact is that, in spite of their differences, the two countries share one profound experience: their history is overwhelmingly a history of plebeians. Neither has ever regarded aristocracy as their national elite and following the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, both countries hastened to get rid of most their aristocrats, regarding them as hostile, i.e. Austrian, German or Hungarian.

Thus the absence of a great and illustrious history has enabled the Czechs and Slovaks to focus on practical state-building based on the standardized manual of democracy, which has also prevented society from becoming too divided. Suffice it to examine the impact historical arguments have had on politics in Poland or Hungary, where they have created deep chasms in society along the tectonic lines of relatively recent history. It is no coincidence that over the past twenty years no professional historian has risen to prominence in Czech and Slovak politics, while in Poland and Hungary historians have formed a key part of the political elite.

Revisiting the division of Czechoslovakia in an interview, Václav Havel admitted that relations between the Slovaks and Czechs may be better today than they had been in the Czechoslovak state and that the Slovaks themselves may have been the ones who have gained more because they had lost the Czech mirror: the mirror in which they constantly compared themselves with the Czechs. He expressed doubts about Czech national identity: “Is it the language? But the language we speak has been rather profaned! Is it our corner of the planet and its countryside? But we’ve been obliterating it systematically!”

However, Václav Havel’s problem was that as an exceptional Czech he justly came down hard on his fellow-countrymen, but he didn’t dare to criticize the Slovaks whom he didn’t know so well. In 1992, I reproached him for having abandoned the Slovaks and taking on the post of Czech President six months later. Today, I know there was nothing he could have done to stop Czechoslovakia from falling apart.

After all, it wasn’t because I had loved Czechoslovakia so much that I mourned the demise of the common state. Communism has taught me to keep my distance from the state. What made me so sad was seeing the rise of nationalism, the mass hysteria nations emit from time to time like a haunting specter.

Separations were fashionable in the early 1990s and these days they are getting quite trendy again. A thread, being pulled asunder by the same negative emotions I experienced when Czechoslovakia fell apart, holds the European Union together. We hear the same recriminations regarding who is getting the short end of the stick and the same calls for sovereignty. Every day is déjà vu, including the frustrating realization that people are bringing about this disintegration even though they don’t want it, just because they lack imagination. In the early 1990s, nobody could really imagine that Czechoslovakia would actually fall apart. Just as today, almost nobody is prepared to admit that the European Union may cease to exist as soon as tomorrow. Nations behave like a child who drops a glass with milk on the floor just to find out what happens, and then is astonished by the mess it has caused.

However, the happy ending of the story of Czechoslovakia’s disintegration that might serve as a Euro sceptic textbook for the peaceful dismantling of the European Union is purely illusory. People tend to forget that the only reason these two nations parted so smoothly was that they shared a common desire to be reunited within the European Union. I wouldn’t even dare to guess how relations between the Czechs and the Slovaks might have developed had they had to pass the test of ruthless geopolitical games without the safety net of the EU.

Having lived a dual life I can’t tell whether I’m more Slovak or Czech. However, what I do know is that I wouldn’t bet a euro on the ability of these two separated nations to withstand a geopolitical crisis that might follow the disintegration of the EU. The only way they could manage it would be by reuniting. Whatever form that new union might have would require them to admit that splitting up was a folly, bred by the delusion of “the end of history”. However, one thing these two nations do have in common is their small size. And from this small geographic size follows the smallness and parochialism of their political and intellectual elites. The fact that Václav Havel towered above them is dramatically just the exception that proves the rule. On the other hand, if these two nations were able to honor and love Havel, they may not yet be entirely lost.

Translated by Julia Sherwood
Prague in 1989 was like a fairy tale. The much-loved Vaclav Havel replaced the unloved President Gustav Husak. Seventy years earlier, another Czech thinker, Thomas Masaryk, founded the liberal democratic republic. In that fantastic year of 1989, another world-renowned Czech author, with some of his friends, restored democracy and renewed the republic. The metaphor of the philosopher king came back into fashion. Painted on the t-shirts of pretty girls on the Charles Bridge, we could see that quiet, smiling face that a just destiny had lifted from prison so it could, in the Hradčany, personify the new freedom of the Czechs. “Havel to the Castle!” was the slogan that could be read everywhere. In early autumn, even the dissident writers could not believe this would happen. After the New Year, this was the most natural thing in the world, and if the President visited Bratislava, the flag went with him. The pure strength of his thoughts lifted him head and shoulders above other heads of state. He was invited everywhere and he imbued respectability to the events where he was present. We first met forty years ago. He was conspicuous with his hearty smile, deep voice that rumbled out into space and his meditative sense of humour. In January of 1990, together with my wife and Adam Michnik, we paid a visit to President Havel. We saw him at work in a Prague Castle pub. He chatted with us, in the company of long-haired, happy artists and freshly recruited ministers. He showed off, boyishly: “You see? The President’s beer-glass is two finger-breadths taller than the other glasses.” The glass was indeed taller, but Havel reached for it less often. Documents were put before him: “Vasek, this is good, you can sign it.” He read them thoroughly, and made modest comments on them. His new role suited him. He applied himself to it with bright but serious humility. He could feel a little dizzy in the whirlwind of events, but he could deal with it with devotion and reflexive honour.

The writer’s fate was to learn from his work as the master of an absurd drama. It was genuinely surprising that not too long ago his home had still been his site solitary confinement and that he could recognize some of his former guards among his new bodyguards.

When Slovakia separated from Czechoslovakia, something Havel was not happy about, he renounced the title of Czechoslovak president and in the interregnum paid a visit to Budapest. Friendly protocol made it possible for the two of us to have breakfast in the government’s guesthouse. I wanted to convince him to return to literature. He had done what was expected of him in the public arena, I told him – now the artist should re-emerge and leave politics to the politicians. There is an obligation, not just the writer’s self-interest, the guest replied. Many expected him to remain president, even if only of the Czechs. The room was filled with sunshine and everyone had their paths on which to return: me to my desk and he to pay respects to his colleague Árpád Göncz, the Hungarian president. He had a busy, interesting life. Perhaps for a moment, but no longer than that, we both envied one another. In my eyes, he was the embodiment of clear-thinking and responsible European politics. On more than one occasion we signed a common declaration. An inner voice told me: if he says so, then this is quite right. Together with Gábor Demszky, mayor of Budapest and former samizdat publisher, I paid a visit to the retired and gaunt Czech president in an old house on a little Prague street, surrounded by friendly female colleagues. Havel was pleased by his long-lost samizdat books in Hungarian, the fruit of much brave and diligent work. His head bowed, he spoke out into space, just as before. He was still himself: cheerful, refined, with just a tad of melancholy. As we came out, I noticed that a little heart had been drawn with lipstick on the bronze plaque bearing his name in the doorway. “Quite right”, I said to myself.

Translated by David Robert Evans

The author is a Hungarian dissident writer, novelist and essayist, known as an advocate of individual freedom. He was elected president of International PEN in the early 90es and of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1997.
At present, expectations about the capacity of Central and Eastern Europe to help Arab reformers are apparently more modest. Is this a sign that the Arab Spring is no more than yesterday’s news for Central Europeans, or has it become clear that they must make long term investments of energy and resources, forgoing near term recognition?

Before 2011, the Visegrad countries hardly noticed the Middle East and North Africa. In the end, extended relations with this region belonged to the bygone era of international socialism, something the new “champions of democracy” were quick to forget. And although the Middle East generates massive attention in international politics, Visegrad foreign policy strategies would usually include it only as a compulsory “must have” — an issue to be kept on the radar for new responsible members of the Euro-Atlantic club. Their interference in the MENA region was limited mainly to contributions to wars and postwar reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. Beyond that, interest in the region was alive only among small pockets of Orientalists.

But they could hardly be blamed for not prioritising the region. For a large portion of their post-89 lives, Central Europeans were submerged in their own struggles with authoritarian pasts and concentrated on reforming their own countries. And once they freed their hands from the immediate concerns of domestic transition (late 90s – early 2000s) and could spare some energy for foreign engagement, there were more obvious candidates for cooperation than the Arab states. The Western Balkans and Eastern Europe – the key foreign policy priorities of the V4 states – were historically and geographically much closer, not
mentioning cultural and linguistic prox-
imity in case of the Slavic-speaking na-
tions. What mattered crucially was that
once the V4 states joined the EU, they
had to find something to contribute to its
policies – in order not to remain eternal
students and recipients of assistance. The
V4’s recent euro-integration trajectory
and East European and Balkan aspira-
tions in the EU were a clear match, and
the dominance of these two regions in
the V4’s international cooperation is un-
likely to be replaced anytime soon.

**FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME
OR A NEW PARTNERSHIP?**

Yet, 2011 did bring a new element into
the V4’s rhetoric and policies, and we are
yet to see if it will be a lasting one. Poland
and Hungary were on the front lines, as
they both held the EU presidency during
the Arab uprisings and thus had to play
a part in their own bilateral tracks and in
terms of contributing to EU policy. Erzsébet Rózsa, head of the Hungarian
Institute of International Relations, em-
phasizes Hungary’s contribution to the
EU’s efforts in Libya – its embassy played
a crucial role both in diplomatic efforts
and in the protection of civilians. In his
2011 foreign policy annual address, Pol-
ish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski
named the Arab Spring as one of the two
main challenges facing the EU – together
with the economic crisis.

All four countries hurried to “do
something” and invested their limited re-
sources into a number of mini-projects. Bratislava, Warsaw, Prague and Buda-
pest hosted a number of workshops, in
which Central Europeans and their Arab
colleagues jointly brainstormed over the
same question: How could CEE utilize
its relevant experience to assist Arab re-
formers. Former V4 dissidents and intel-
lectuals traveled to Tunis and Cairo and
answered questions about dismantling
the security apparatus and old party
structures, measures to eradicate cor-
rupption and reform public institutions.
Sometimes they had to cool down the
hopes of their Arab colleagues, suggest-
ing that after twenty years Central Eu-
rope has still not been able to deal with
all the ghosts of its past. Jan Pieklo, direc-
tor of PAUCI, a Polish-Ukrainian NGO,
who participated in some of these ex-
changes, says that these encounters have
forced him to rethink Polish transitions:
“For MENA folks, democracy is like a
panacea. Like for us at the time of mar-
tial law in Poland. Today we understand
that democracy is a problem in itself.”

Although it is clear that the V4 gov-
ernments went beyond declarations and
provided real assistance – we have yet to
see how lasting this support will be, since
MENA is not at the top of V4’s priorities.
The representatives of V4 civil society in-
terviewed for this article agree that fund-
ning, provided by their respective MFAs,
was important in helping them to get a
foot in the region. In the end, the noble
idea of sharing transformation know-
how and establishing links in civil society
can be implemented only after one buys
plane tickets, makes a hotel reservation
and hires an interpreter. Without a part-
nership with their MFAs, most Central
European NGOs cooperating with Egypt
or Tunisia would not be able to run ac-
tivities.

Ivana Raslavská, with the Bratisla-
va-based Pontis foundation, who runs
a capacity building project for NGOs in
Egypt, has underscored the Egyptian
enthusiasm “to change things, to
achieve something”. Although no major
reforms were adopted in Egypt a year af-
ter toppling Mubarak, CEE intellectuals
engaged in cooperation projects speak
about changes that have occurred at the
level of individuals – they are hungry for
information, and interest in politics has
been awakened in segments of society
where it previously never existed.

Despite tremendous interest in in-
formation about politics, the Egyptian
authorities do not seem to be supportive
of dialogue with foreign organisations.
A number of CEE activists have com-
plained that the present military regime
keeps searching for an “invisible Western
hand”, and therefore a number of work-
shops in Egypt simply had to be can-
celled or postponed indefinitely. The in-
itial premise of many in Visegrad, “CEE is
more fit to help the Middle East because
we have never colonized it and are not
well-known for our oil interests”, might
crumble. And although the Central Eu-
ropean experience attracts interest, it is
only one of many examples that is being
studied.

Thus, the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles
and Hungarians who volunteered to
launch cooperation projects with Egypt
or Tunisia are struggling on various
fronts – they have to reiterate that do-
monic funding should not dry out, they
have to explain that they are well-inten-
tioned and not part of a conspiracy of

“Western intrigue”. Is this balancing act
working?

Zora Hesová, from the Prague-
based Association for International Af-
fairs, cautions against inflated expecta-
tions: “Our impact might be comparable
to a drop in the sea. But that does not
mean that our work is useless – once
there are people interested in open dis-
ussion, and we are able to provide them
with various contacts and information,
we should do it.”

**ONLY THE BEGINNING**

Yet the non-governmental organizations
from the V4 are still generally in the
phase of searching – for contacts, part-
ers and useful fields of future activity.
As Klára Bednářová, who works with the
Prague-based People in Need puts it, “Al-
though the lessons of 89 are important,
we really have to move beyond them. It
is interesting to discuss the parallels and
share our expertise, but now it is time
to address very specific concerns of the
Egyptian civil society. The state is not lis-
tening, so we can work only with the civil
society now and for this we need time”.

Given the similarity of CEE post-
communist experience and limited re-
sources of the Visegrad countries, it
makes sense to ask why we have not seen
much V4 cooperation on this issue. The
Visegrad Group has adopted a common
declaration in support of Arab democ-
ratization (March 2011), but has not yet
pursued joint action. Of course, NGOs
do talk about the need and importance
of regional cooperation, but the debate
often comes to a halt once the question
of funding is raised. The prerequisite for
joint projects is that donors would have
to give up their demands for “owner-
ship” or individual “visibility”. The dust
and debris have not yet settled, but once
it is clear which V4 NGOs want to work
in the region longterm, it is necessary to
come up with a joint V4 strategy – one
that could actually be implemented. As
Raslavská suggests, “If we plan a long-
term strategy and allocate resources,
more people would believe in the pos-
sibility of making an impact. However,
if more people believe that our engage-
ment in the region is just short term, we
are unlikely to succeed.”

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and the Eastern European Experience: 
Inspiration, Similarities and Differences
Egyptian political activists have been inspired by the Eastern European experience and have usually dreamt about achieving similar political changes.

With the 25th of January Revolution, this dream has become a reality. Egypt is currently passing through a very critical time in its history and the Eastern European transition to democracy is more relevant than ever. That's why I will divide this article into two main parts: In the first, I will attempt to describe the primary factors that led to Egypt's Revolution. In the second, I will emphasize the influence of Eastern Europe on the Egyptian revolution, and I will try to develop the lessons that could be learnt for the transition period.

I. The 25th of January Revolution in Egypt: Causes and Main Actors

Analyzing social movements, such as the one that drove the Egyptian people to Tahrir Square to demand “freedom, social justice and dignity”, it is essential to comprehend the “how” in order to understand the “why” – the circumstances and causes of this socio-political change. Applying this insight to the case of Egypt, I will present the key phases that preceded the revolution and the extent to which these served as triggers.

2005 – PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES: SEARCH FOR “FREEDOM”?
In 2005, the Mubarak regime was forced by domestic and international pressure to slightly open. For the first time, an amendment to article 76 of the constitution was made, providing Egypt the opportunity to hold direct presidential elections. Profiting from this political openness, the period witnessed the rise of two main actors: the Kefaya Movement (Enough) that organized anti-Mubarak and anti-succession demonstrations and the liberal Ghad Party that advanced a candidate against Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections. Those political groups presented voices of change, and allowed young activists to enter political life and obtain experience in socio-political participation. For the next few years, the politically active Egyptian youth distinguished themselves from the stagnant older generation through cyber activism, which forged the youth’s new opposition identity.

2006 – EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL PROTESTS: SEARCH FOR “SOCIAL JUSTICE”?
As in many other Arab countries, economic liberalization and high rates of economic growth in Egypt had no impact on the society at large, primarily because of corruption and a lack of just distribution. For this reason, 40% of the population still lived under the poverty line, while inflation and unemployment was as high as 20%. Furthermore, increasing privatization resulted in the deterioration of the public sector, which lead to less employment and a lack of economic rights for those working in the growing private sector. In this context of social frustration and dissatisfaction, principally over the socio-economic policies of the regime, in December 2006, over 24 000 textile workers in Mahalla El-Kobra, a city north of Cairo, went on strike to fight for their financial rights. This huge strike produced a spillover effect on social protests in the country. Driven by an increasing population, new sectors of the labor force, such as doctors, teachers and academics,
joined the working class protests. The absolute number of protests consequently increased from 266 to 614 from 2006-2007, eventually peaking at around 900 in 2010.

6TH OF APRIL 2008
- CALL FOR A NATIONAL STRIKE
As in 2006, Mahalla El-Kobra textile workers decided to hold a sit-in strike in their company, demanding additional economic rights they previously didn’t achieve. For the first time, young Egyptian cyber activists took up the initiative of calling for a national strike in the whole of Egypt in solidarity with the workers. They also expressed anger because of bad political and economic conditions. The call was established via a Facebook group, which eventually had around 70,000 members. Even if this call didn’t succeed, since few responded to it, their success was elsewhere. This was the first time any activist had the courage to ask for a protest on the national level. From this point onward, two interlinked factors emerged: the youth and social protests, both demanding change. An active, politicized youth slowly took the place of the old and official opposition in Egypt. For instance, the youth who called for this strike founded a political movement called the 6th of April Movement, one of the movements responsible for organizing the protests on the 25th of January.

2010-2011: YOUTH SEARCHING FOR “DIGNITY AND ALTERNATIVES”
In the years leading up to the 2011 revolution, politicized youth became one of the main forces in the struggle for freedom and democratic change. One of the most important youth movements that emerged at this time was the El-Baradei Campaign for Change Movement. This movement sought to mobilize people for change by promoting Mohamed El-Baradei, ex-director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, as an alternative to the regime and plausible presidential candidate in the 2011 elections. As in 2005, a number of youth became active in politics through the El-Baradei Campaign movement. In this context, the death of Khaled Said, a young man who was beaten to death by police, triggered several youth demonstrations. This event, in which police killed a young “non-activist”, was decisive in pressing the youth to search for dignity. Khaled Said was the symbol of the undignified life they were being compelled to live.

By November 2010, regime strategy abruptly changed because of the influence of the new guard lead by Gamal Mubarak within the NDP party (the former ruling party). The parliamentary elections were completely rigged (whereas in 2005, they were partially rigged) and social frustration grew enormously, hence the call for a nationwide protest on the 25th of January 2011 by several youth groups and movements. As in April of 2008, Facebook was the tool for spreading the call. Due to the Tunisian revolution, the youth got an unexpectedly large response. In the first phase, until February 7th, people responded to the youth appeal and massive crowds gathered in Tahrir Square under the slogan: “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice.” The second phase, until February 11th, came close to civil disobedience. Frustrated since 2006, as was previously mentioned, workers organized strikes that involved all economic sectors (including military mills) across the country. Through civil unrest, Mubarak was forced to step down.

II. Egypt’s Revolution and the Current Transition to Democracy: Inspiration, Similarities and Differences with Eastern Europe

EGYPT’S REVOLUTION: INSPIRATIONS FROM EASTERN EUROPE?
After the 6th of April 2008, two Eastern European countries became especially relevant to Egypt: Serbia and Poland.

For the youth, the Otpor experience in Serbia was inspiring. Films relating the techniques used by Otpor to mobilize people and fight authoritarian rule were widely disseminated in political opposition areas. From the first day of its foundation, the 6th of April movement took Otpor movement as a guide, and they even took their logo as their own. With the help of militant intellectuals, activists began to lecture about Otpor’s success and the lessons that Egyptian youth could take from it. The strength of non-violent resistance and peaceful strategies for change was the main focus. Mobilizing people and protesting through original methods was also an important technique that youth movements began to use, especially in the 6th of April movement and “The Campaign for El-Baradei Movement.” This was especially visible with the Khaled Said method of demonstration. Protests were organized in an original way: Young people stood for hours facing the sea, dressed in black, each protestor five meters apart from the next. Those protests appeared to be a very strong way to show the power of well-organized peaceful protests. However, the main difference between Serbian and Egyptian youth was the lack of a united strategy for change. Young people in Serbia were working through a clear strategy put in place by Otpor leaders, with the support of the West. By contrast, Egyptian youth were divided into various political movements and parties. The first time they managed to coordinate was on the eve of the 25th of January Revolution.

Moving to social protests and labor movements, the Solidarity movement and trade union experience in Poland was extremely relevant. Leftist activists, who began to spread short films and notes about it, especially emphasized the later. The main focus was on the capacity of the labor movements to coordinate and make national strikes that could compel the regime to step down or make large concessions, as Solidarity had in 1980 and 1989. If this idea was very clear in the mind of leftist activists in Egypt, the situation was different for actors in the labor movement, who were reluctant to coordinate. Every labor movement was mostly focusing on the problems of its own sector. Hence, contrary to the Polish experience, where change occurred through a unified labor movement paralyzing the regime, Egyptian strikes were simultaneous but uncoordinated.

Later in the summer of 2010, with the presidential elections closer, Egypt’s political activists become very interested in studying the electoral revolutions of Ukraine and Serbia.
This scenario appeared to be the last chance to achieve change in Egypt. Seminars and films were spread. Activists, especially those from the Campaign El-Baradei, were seriously thinking about such a scenario, given that they were pushing Mohamed El-Baradei to run in the September 2011 elections. However, the revolution erupted before that date ever arrived.

EGYPT’S TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY: LESSONS FROM EASTERN EUROPE?

We agree with the qualification of Asaf Bayat (prominent political scientist) on the way change occurred in Egypt: “REFOLUTION”, meaning that people undertook an extraordinary revolution in demanding regime, but power was seized by the Military Council (the SCAF), an institution of the incumbent state and former regime. This transition period carries the perils of a counter-revolutionary restoration, precisely because the revolution has not made it into the key institutions of state power. In fact, this has created a sort of a continuous contradiction between the SCAF and revolutionary political forces interests and visions for reforms that should be undertaken. In this context, two important lessons could be of special interest for Egypt in its current transition period.

III. Round Table Agreements:

The Round Table agreements that were held between the old regime and new forces in Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, etc.) helped to set all the legal, political and economic rules that governed the transition process in those countries. The transition period then went smoothly. In Egypt, by contrast, there was no agreement on the following: 1. The end date of the transition period, and the transfer of power to civilian authorities, 2. A concrete agenda of reform. In addition, no formal channel of communication between the SCAF and political forces has been established. Now, on the eve of writing a new constitution, we think that two roundtables (or a dynamic similar to the roundtable) need to be held: the first should be held between opposition forces to achieve a consensus about the constitution, while the second should be held between opposition forces and SCAF, in order to set the rules that will govern the rest of the transition period and military-civilian relations. In this context, the Hungarian round table talks, which were held first among the opposition forces themselves, and second between the opposition forces and the old regime forces, could be inspiring for Egypt, given that it has a fragmented opposition that needs to achieve consensus about a democratic and constitutional agenda.

IV. Institutional Reforms

Institutional reforms are the anchor of any transition to democracy. The first wave of the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.) was vastly more successful than the second wave at the beginning of the 2000s (Ukraine, Serbia, Georgia, etc.) for one important reason (although there were certainly more factors): institutional reform. In countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, reforms were clear and radical, contrary to the examples of Ukraine and Serbia where the failure of institutional reforms led to a backlash. This is an extremely important lesson for Egypt, if it wants to see its transition to democracy succeed. In Egypt, the state institution has yet to be reformed. The old system still prevails in all state institutions, since figures changed but the system has not. The violent events Egypt witnessed serve as proof of this fact. The same unprofessional and pro-regime discourse is present in the media and police violence is still the order of the day, without even mentioning the institutions of education and healthcare (that require a full overhaul). Hence, a schedule for effective reform will be the key for a successful transition to democracy in Egypt, with the security sector and media at the top. The independence of the judiciary has to be realized immediately.

CONCLUSION

Egypt is not witnessing a decisive phase in its history, as three major challenges stand in the way of its transition to democracy:

1. Achieving an agreement between political forces and the SCAF on the rules that should govern the rest of the transition process and military-civilian relations after it ends.
2. Establishing consensus between political forces for writing a constitution that could represent all Egyptians and not only political currents or parties that receive the majority in parliamentary elections, taking in account that it is the parliament who will have the duty to choose the constitutional assembly.
3. Arrival of a pro-change president, since the counter-revolutionary powers are still powerful in Egypt. Here, we should also stress the fact that a pro-change president is never sufficient alone, but should be strong enough to apply a democratic agenda by reforming state institutions. The example of Ukraine is certainly important in that respect.

In conclusion, we should not forget that Egypt’s transition success will have an extraordinary effect on the future of the Arab Spring as a whole: It is obvious that in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the overthrow of the regime did not come at the hands of the military – the traditional guardian of revolution and political change in the Middle East – but through civil society embodied by a large popular movement. Egyptian youth were inspired by their Tunisian peers. Libyan and Syrian rebels were in touch with the Egyptians online and in exchanges. Hence, we can say that a sort of grassroots cooperation dynamic is already present between Arab Spring actors. Thus, the possibility of accession to power of those who were supportive of revolutionary movements will certainly increase the possibility of regional cooperation at an official level, calling to mind the fact that the Visegrad Group was established in 1991, only when pro-change forces were in power.

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EU PRESIDENCIES IN central europe

three countries in the region have concluded their mission of presiding in the council of the EU. Each has taken place during difficult times involving a conventional war outbreak in its vicinity, the arab spring and the economic crisis in europe. Here, we examine these tenures from the point of view of the V4. We also speculate on the future prospects of the Slovak presidency.
It was a government that, at least at the beginning, new government, which emerged after a turbulent internal also special, in a way, as it was taken over by a completely different mode, it was a presidency that was not defined in terms of the Lisbon Treaty. The Hungarian presidency was different, because it is held by a government of continuity and a government that doesn't seem to be under scrutiny, at least not so far. So it seems to me that these presidencies had no regional dimension. It also seems to me that the Polish presidency has not created any kind of regional dynamics and the crisis brought about by the deepening heterogeneity of the region. However, some attempts, such as those in the energy sector, do include a promotion of certain projects crucial for the region.

**Wojciech Przybylski:** Does energy security define the Central European region?

**Andrew Michta:** On one hand, there is cooperation when it comes to nuclear energy. Czechs and Hungarians are against what has happened in Germany, so there is a sort of coordination there. As for gas, interconnectors are being built, which will be an important element for creating an energy market in this part of Europe with the possibility of uniting the markets of these countries. On the other hand, it is difficult to talk about a unified approach of the Visegrad Group toward energy, because Poland follows a different path when it comes to shale gas, and gas in general. Other countries simply do nothing about it. Poland carries out its gas-related policy first of all in Berlin and Brussels, not to mention what is happening in its relations with Russia.

However, we also need to mention the American perspective: when we are thinking about the European presidency, we are not thinking in such regional categories, but about American relations with Europe as a whole. This looks interesting at the moment because of Poland, which in my opinion is trying to enter the core group of Europe. This was so during the Weimar Triangle, under the auspices of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, where it was strongly underlined that Poland sees itself more as a country aspiring to those of a higher category than one which considers the countries in its region to be its natural partners in cooperation.

I would add something else on this issue. I’ll never forget when I was in Bratislava, at the Globsec conference, when one of the participants of the panel in which I also took part, Tomas Valasek, said that there’s a feeling that Poland is neglecting Visegrad relations. The Polish speaker repudiated this vehemently, saying it was not so.

**Wojciech Przybylski:** On the other hand, Poland needs the Visegrad Group to support the Eastern Partnership program. Eastern Partnership has successfully become a priority of the Visegrad Group. From the point of view of the Czech presidency, how would you evaluate the path we took in this sphere?

**Vít Dostál:** I think that both the Czech and Polish presidency have done a lot for the Eastern Partnership. However, if the reforms needed for Eastern Partnership are not implemented, it will be difficult to achieve any major success, even for a presidency that supports the Eastern Partnership. I’d also like to go back to what was said about the Visegrad Group. I think that this Eastern dimension is an example of an issue on which the Visegrad countries agree and want to keep the partnership high on the agenda in the European Union. I’d say that this cooperation has been successful and that the Visegrad Group has its own initiatives to support these countries.

I won’t agree that the activities of the Group are getting worse and worse and that this cooperation is not good. I think that the Visegrad Group has now proposed its own programs within the International Visegrad Fund for the Eastern Partnership. They already include certain components that have yet to be introduced within the European Union, for example scholarships for students from these countries. In this, I think that the Visegrad Group is perhaps in the vanguard of the European Union. Also, there are spheres other than the energy sector in which the Visegrad Group is very active: for example the integration of the Western Balkans. There is also the Visegrad Fund, which provides extensive support to civil society cooperation.

**Andrew Michta:** I’m afraid I have to disagree with you about the Visegrad Group being so active, with all these programs, scholarships and so on. I’m not questioning that, but for me the value of regional groups depends on whether they translate to getting all of Europe to act. I still remember the very uneven response of European countries to Belarus. I wouldn’t even disagree with the statement that the American reaction to Belarus was a stronger, more positive attempt to exert pressure than the divided voices of Europe. So I would insist that the true test of effectiveness for such regional groups as the Visegrad Group is not so much whether they can build civil society or give scholarships. These are very valuable and necessary things, but are they capable of getting the rest of the continent into action?
Wojciech Przybylski: Coming back to the future of the EU project, has Poland, as the third Visegrad country in a row to preside over the EU cooperation, marked its presidency in an unequivocal way, in a way that is significant for the region of small and medium countries?

Marek Cichocki: Let’s take a look at the speech of Radosław Sikorski, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered on November 28, 2011 in Berlin. These were definitely not views which would express the attitude or the general opinion typical of the region of Central Europe, and we also need to pay heed to the fact that this is a speech of great political weight and that it was delivered toward the end of the presidency. Also, the Prime Minister announced that during the last month of 2011 Poland would be very active in proposing remedial actions for the eurozone.

But as Mr. Michta has noticed, it’s more a sign of Polish attempts to make its way into the discussion, rather than being in the center, which is being crystalized as a result of the eurozone crisis. Poland’s current level of development makes it impossible to join the eurozone, at least under the conditions revealed by the current crisis. Slovakia has done that, and it’s interesting to watch the Slovak example with this point of view in mind. It shows not only the bright sides of this decision, but in the context of the last government crisis and the atmosphere surrounding it, we can also see the darker sides of being in the eurozone in times of crisis, when the citizens of Slovakia learned that they have to contribute to the stabilization fund with about 1500 euros per capita, from their own pocket. It’s very difficult to explain to citizens of Slovakia why they are supposed to give this money to maintain a certain level of public spending in a country like Germany, which, despite the crisis, has a comparatively higher level of affluence than Slovakia.

I think that the Polish opposition is 100% wrong in its opinion on this speech, regarding it as pro-German. I think that was a very anti-German speech. If you read it carefully, Minister Sikorski said things that cannot be liked in Germany, regardless of official or public reaction. Precisely because this speech matches the growing pressure on Germany to show its readiness to save the eurozone, its willingness to accept changes that would probably also require adjustments to the German constitution, which is very difficult but would be a relief for the eurozone and would possibly help to solve several issues connected with the growing crisis. Can anyone who says that Europe should be a federation, be criticized in Germany? No, because Germans would have to break their own linguistic correctness, which they use to describe the European integration. Even if they themselves know that this is not a concept that can be implemented in Europe, at least since Great Britain joined the European integration, and definitely not in a Union of 27 states.

I agree that the speech contained things said in a very German language, which targeted different elements of Angela Merkel’s position on the crisis. First of all, the very concept that you mentioned, that is Merkel-Sarkozy: we are the ones repairing the eurozone, and when the house is on fire, we are not very much interested in what the others have to say. David Cameron and many others have already heard that. Secondly, Sikorski paid a lot of attention in his speech to a strong European Commission. If we look at the relations between Merkel and the European Commission, and especially Barroso, over the last weeks and months, we see that there is an overt and very deep conflict. So saying such a thing in Germany, supporting the Commission, is tantamount to opposing Merkel’s current policy.

Andrew Michta: This is a criticism of the German policy, in fact.

Marek Cichocki: Yes, but wrapped in the language of German correctness. In this sense, when I’m saying this is anti-German, I don’t mean anti-German as such, but that this speech includes points that are against what Angela Merkel has represented for quite some time on the issue of the crisis. Taking into account the external and internal context, this is precisely the pressure that Germany is subject to from the outside, for example: let the European Central Bank finally buy up bonds and let some money into the system, because we’re suffocating. But there is also huge internal pressure, because consenting to that means opening a debate about changes in the German constitution. And then Merkel will have the Constitutional Court against her, and she will have a problem with a referendum. Saying that we want to change the constitution by a referendum in Germany means stepping on the ground we’ve tried to avoid since the Second World War, it’s crossing a sort of Rubicon. It’s putting her back against the wall, and definitely her reaction to these speeches cannot be euphoric optimism.

Andrew Michta: One thing which is very interesting to me, which we haven’t mentioned yet is the fact that this speech, considering what is happening in Europe and how it is perceived by the United States, shows which part of Europe is functioning and which is not. This is also so for the Eastern Partnership, because for me the Eastern Partnership was an attempt to put an end to talking about the post-communist Europe versus the old Europe. There was the Swedish–Polish cooperation and discussion around this subject, crossing these faraway paths. The crisis in Europe has led to a situation where, from Washington, there is a Europe which functions and a Europe which doesn’t. And it’s not along the East-West but the North-South lines. Sikorski presented himself as a leader from the North during this talk. From the point of view of economic growth and the possibilities of functioning, Poland is seen in the States as a country of success. The point of reference is where Poland was ten or twenty years ago.

Vít Dostál: I would also like to say a few words about the question with which we started. We need to say directly that there is no Polish presidency on the issue of the eurozone crisis. There is the permanent presidency of Germany, the Frankfurt Group, Germany and France. We couldn’t have expected the Polish presidency to change the course of these solutions. And here, Sikorski’s speech in Berlin was an attempt to force his way into this narrow circle and say something, which would be preceded only by speeches of Sarkozy, Merkel and several other politicians before the Berlin summit in December. Sikorski also cautioned against the rise of a two-speed Europe. This was an important statement.
The Czech prime minister unfortunately does not agree. He even wrote an article stating that he is not at all afraid of two speeds. But for the region, it’s an important statement. There was no reaction by the Czech media to Sikorski’s speech. There was only one article from an economist dealing with these matters, who translated an excerpt from the speech and commented that he can fully agree with these arguments. Otherwise, there was no reaction in the Czech Republic, and these were very important things. There was also one paragraph in Sikorski’s speech directed at the British. He said: “Do not be convinced that this crisis has nothing to do with you”. When I read that, I thought that the same could be said to the Czech government, which seems to have a similar approach as the British. “We don’t care, this is a eurozone crisis and that they should look for some solution there.”

Andrew Michta: I’m thinking two things. The first is, let’s leave this to the economists. But I’m hearing more and more signals that the capitalization of British banks is not as good as most people imagine, so there is another potential alarm in the crisis. Another thing is where this sharp view on the British came from. I think that there is one more element that will lead us to the presidency. You might remember the Group of Five’s letter to Catherine Ashton concerning the CSDP, that kind of thing. Again, the British opposition was a key element in this initiative. I think that there are more perspectives for looking at the United Kingdom right now. And it’s not just a question of the federal concept, but also a question of some political initiatives and where the British see themselves in the European Union. At least for me, in this speech there was an overtone of “if you don’t want to help, do not disturb. Just withdraw.” Which is interesting if we think about the future of the idea of the European Union. Because we’re talking here about a country which is one of the two remaining key countries having something to do with military strength and thinking about it fairly seriously, so they are a crucial element in any later solutions within security structures or the defense of Europe, etc.

However, we need to ask a question about what is happening at the practical level. The British and the French are getting on as far as cooperation on security issues is concerned, because there is no other way. This is a very serious situation. The United States doubled its military budget over the last decade, but it was the budget of an operating army, meaning that this was an army that could be sent into different places. It was never depreciated. Also, this was during the period when we told everyone how to build countries and nations. Now we are in a situation where the balance can tip very radically in favor of Asia, and we are going to have a smaller marine force than during the last thirty years. There are talks of closing some of the F45 programs, and the eleventh aircraft carrier will probably not be built. Even insurance will be cut, this will be a very dramatic shortening of options. Because of that, Europe is looked at in a very specific way, as if it was being asked what it has to offer. We’ve already had the Balkan disease.

The problem of Europe’s defense after the end of the Cold War was already visible during the Balkan air campaign. And don’t judge my words as too brutal, but to me, what they call armies in Europe are in fact job creation programs. It’s storing people in blue or green suits, who cannot actually be deployed. They cannot go outside their territory. An air force meant to circle over Belgium is an aviation club. Germany is actually undergoing demilitarization. I never thought I would say such a thing about Germany, achieving such great success and pacifism.

Wojciech Przybylski: Minister Sikorski was the second minister during the Polish presidency to speak on the European forum about the threat of war if the crisis is not solved. The first was the Minister of Finance – Jacek Rostowski – in his speech in the European Parliament. But is it not an exaggeration, because on one hand the fiscal agreement regulations do not pose a direct threat of military conflict, and on the other hand, the presidency of a non-euro country is not entitled to bring up such serious issues and lead such a strong presidency in European matters?

Vít Dostál: I can repeat what I was saying, that it doesn’t really matter that Poland is holding the presidency, because I don’t know if Spain had done anything about the crisis during its presidency, with the same being true for Belgium and Hungary. The countries which are significant in this crisis are those which can help to save the eurozone. Poland, which is a non-euro country and is still poorer than Western Europe, does not have a lot to say here.

Marek Cichocki: This Polish presidency has already been held within the limits of the Lisbon Treaty, which has fundamentally changed its character. In this sense, to look from a formal point of view, the Czech presidency functioned under completely different conditions than the Polish one. As has already been said, Poland is not in the eurozone and because of objective reasons it cannot declare that it’s going to join within a specific timeline, as it had been trying to do until recently. Thirdly, as I had already said, there are two countries, Germany and France, which declare their readiness to solve the crisis and have a sort of informal approach toward this. This is not indicated in the Lisbon Treaty, it’s created in an informal way. Like during the G20 summit, where interestingly, President Obama’s participation was not very visible, which is fascinating, because if we compare it with other summits, it was completely different, wasn’t it? But during this summit we could notice Merkel and Sarkozy in action. America was more in the shadow, sort of withdrawn.

The last G20 summit also showed that this leadership is strong enough to actually lead to a change of government in Greece, but not strong enough to convince the United States, China or India, to participate in financing the European stabilization fund. In this sense, we can say that the G20 summit was a failure. Similar situations with such examples of ineffectiveness can undermine this type of leadership. But of course, this is a reality where asking about the presidency is irrelevant, in that the presidency will possibly be kept only as a way of promoting the culture of each member state in Brussels, but not as an institutional instrument of participating in the leadership of the European Union. In this sense, what Minister Sikorski and Prime Minister Tusk did was very interesting: an attempt to take a place at the European table and make one’s voice heard on the occasion of the formal leadership in the EU Council.
AFTER six long months, the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union ended in glory on the last day of June of 2011. Croatian accession negotiations to the EU have now officially closed. The next phase will involve drafting the accession treaty, followed by a referendum in Croatia and ratification in the EU’s 27 national parliaments. After all that, on the 1st of January 2013, Croatia will hopefully become the EU’s 28th Member State. This will probably be the legacy of the Hungarian Council presidency.

SIX MONTHS BEFORE
In January of 2011, when Hungary took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union, expectations in Brussels and other European capitals were either low or extremely low, and the mood rather somber. There was strong criticism of Budapest concerning its new media law. People were also thinking about a series of rather alarming facts, which taken together appeared to provide little hope. First of all, the country had almost gone bankrupt eighteen months earlier and needed a bailout brokered by the EU and the IMF. Furthermore, in late spring of 2010, the newly elected government had challenged the terms of these loans from international institutions, and the same government has struggled in dealing with the dramatic economic situation. In addition, alongside the government, with its constitutional majority, a new extreme right wing force appeared on the Hungarian political scene: Jobbik. The anti-Roma radicalism of this party, coupled with the structural weakness (or, as some put it, intellectual and ideological bankruptcy) of the Hungarian left, put Mr. Orban’s Fidesz in a semi-monopoly position in parliament. The socio-economic situation of the Roma minority has remained an issue across the Union. The issue became particularly visible three months before the Hungarian presidency when France expelled a number of Roma migrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, just a few weeks before the start of the presidency, the
The problem for the Hungarian presidency was that there was a large discrepancy between public attention (in the first two months) and the delivery of results (mainly in June). When positive items appeared, the media were too busy with other topics to sum up Budapest’s achievements. Hence, in many eyes the Hungarian presidency was, at best, a limited success because it did not turn out to be a major failure. One major setback was the cancellation of the Eastern Partnership summit in Budapest. This was to have been a major event. One needs to remember that the event will officially be co-hosted by both the Poles and the Hungarians. Another major problem was a letter sent to the European Commission critical of the European Semester – this created some confusion as to what the presidency really wanted (one Hungarian minister was apparently pushing for fast European Semester assessments, while another was critical that they were being done too quickly). Another element that raised some eyebrows was the fact that some of the new officials working on the Hungarian presidency were still being trained in January: they were learning on the job. However their commitment helped public administrators and the Permanent Representative to achieve substantial results.

The larger issue at stake, however, is whether or not the rotating presidency is relevant. Over the first six months of 2011, all the major issues for the European Union did not fall within the remit of the rotating presidency. The Hungarians were there and helped as much as they could. On the key issues, however, they were either absent politically (not being a member of the eurozone, the Hungarian finance minister did not participate in the Eurogroup meetings) or structurally (the situation in North Africa and the conflict in Libya were primarily the responsibility of the High Representative). All in all, the Hungarians have provided good services of high quality, but the system would have functioned (or not) as usual – with or without them. What is the added value of the rotating presidency for the EU? Should the system of rotating Council presidencies be maintained or limited in the future?

In the Hungarian case, initial expectations were so low that it was no challenge to surpass them, though early criticism of Hungarian domestic politics in the European press did not make life easy. Some comments during the presidency were very negative, even offensive. At the same time, these criticisms reflected not only a specific view of Hungarian domestic affairs but also two other developments. First, the Hungarians ran a low profile presidency, in which the political class did not challenge the efforts of the bureaucrats, but neither did they provide much assistance. Second, despite the efforts of public officials, the image of the country has not improved over the last few months. Post-Lisbon, the added value of having rotating presidencies could be twofold, but the Hungarians scored poorly on one count and potentially very well on the other. The first six months of 2011 gave the perfect opportunity to promote the image of Hungary, but this was not exploited to the full extent possible. This was mainly due to the domestic political situation and their limited range of activities. On the second count, the result was decidedly better. Investment in public officials, who know the functioning of the EU machinery in detail, cannot be overvalued. This should contribute to more effective Hungarian participation in future EU integration.

A LEGISLATIVE MODEL OF A COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

The Hungarian presidency was of a legislative or administrative nature not a political one. Many dossiers were produced thanks to the tireless efforts of some 700 public officials, who worked for their department, their country and the EU’s success. It was the administrative side of the presidency that shone, despite low expectations at the outset. The fact that it was a low profile administrative presidency is in itself an important development, as Hungary never claimed its presidency to have any major political dimension. This is important, given that it confirms the Lisbon Treaty model of political responsibilities and leadership in the Union. In theory, this document stripped the rotating presidency of any major political input. We have now had two consecutive Council presidencies that have confirmed that rotating presidencies not only cannot play a political function, but also that they do not want to play any major political role. The caretaker Belgian prime minister did not challenge the ex-Belgian leader, who is currently the European Council’s
president. The Hungarian prime minister had no intention of challenging Herman Van Rompuy. Mr. Orban’s lack of interest in European politics can be compared with the désintéressement of the Spanish leader Zapateto. Both of them were so strongly focused on domestic political developments that the EU’s fate was of secondary importance. In the Spanish case, it turned out to be detrimental to the presidency’s fate. In the Hungarian case, Mr. Orban was in perfect alignment with the European mainstream press, who did not want him to play any major role. The relationship between the Hungarian leader and the European press was strengthened by mid-presidency, when Mr. Orban’s message was that he did not care, comparing Brussels to Soviet Moscow and Habsburg Vienna, and the EU’s media also did not care. Moreover, he did not care when the EU press criticized the Hungarian constitution in April.

ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENCY PRIORITIES

On the issue of the six-pack, the Hungarians did very well. If the legislative process in the Union takes on average over 20 months, completing the files within the Hungarian term would have been a major success. This did not happen, however, and we still do not know if the entire exercise is going to be successful. It appears that the last outstanding difference between the Council and the Parliament is so great, it could well challenge the entire adoption of the six-pack. This was the most important legislative file and it was not adopted during the Hungarian term.

The energy files were completely disrupted during the presidency, but not because of presidency mistakes. The Fukushima accident has had a major impact on European discourse about nuclear energy. The Hungarians were able to lead the process after the February European Council, even if no major decision was possible due to Japanese developments. Failure to adopt the European Roadmap 2050 in energy was yet another blow to presidency plans. Nonetheless the Hungarians cannot be held responsible for external developments, and the national veto kept them from reaching a major agreement.

The European Roma Strategy was adopted in June. It will only be possible to assess its effectiveness after some years, but there are already voices complaining that the document is largely toothless and potentially meaningless.

Again, the finalization of Croat accession talks is the biggest success of the presidency and it would not have been possible without Hungarian commitment, alongside active engagement on all sides of the process (the Commission, the Member States and Zagreb).

On the other hand, Schengen enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria did not happen. The Dutch veto was still in place. Had this not been a Hungarian priority, they would not have been held responsible for its failure. However, they did declare it a major priority, which was left unfulfilled. Some progress has been made on the issue, but this was coupled with the Hungarian inability to stop the anti-Schengen debate from emerging across the Union (between Italy, France and Denmark).

There were no major reports of procedural setbacks. The cooperation model with the High Representative was positive and functional, and the Hungarians did not try to challenge the foreign policy chief of the EU. The Hungarian foreign minister likes to say that he represented the Union on behalf of Lady Ashton more often than he chaired the General Affairs Council. The Hungarian model of cooperation within the Council, with other institutions (the Parliament, the Commission) proved to be more or less effective. However, one significant setback was communication with the Commission on the European Semester. This incident demonstrated a lack of political commitment on the side of the Hungarian elite.

The last benchmark concerns the cooperation between the rotating presidency and the president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. At the beginning of the term, there were some communication problems on issues such as cooperation on preparatory work for the European Councils (i.e. one comment indicated that the GAC was sidelined in the early months but the situation significantly improved from March). On the political level, there was no competition between the European Council President and the Hungarian Prime Minister; some comments indicated a good personal relationship between the two leaders.

Towards the end of the term, levels of trust and cooperation increased. However, this needs to be contextualized with the sometimes anti-European or anti-Brussels rhetoric of Prime Minister Orban. Such statements even challenged, if only for a moment, the successful conclusion of the Croatian accession talks.

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS: HUNGARY IN THE EU – WHAT NOW?

Despite political struggles, Hungarian officials did deliver more than was expected of them. The country passed the “maturity test” and now possesses a public administration that knows the EU’s hidden corridors inside out. This is truly a unique experience on which the Hungarian state should now capitalize. Post-presidency, Hungary should avoid following the path of self-marginalization by facing up to new challenges and redefining its European strategy. It now has one of the most knowledgeable public administrations that should be able to help bring the country out of its economic and political woes, and thereby make Hungary one of the most engaged members of the European Union.

This material has been also published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation

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SLOVAKIA AND THE EU PRESIDENCY IN 2016

Forecasting: The participation of the Netherlands in the Presidency trio with Slovakia offers another opportunity to strengthen V4-Benelux cooperation, counterbalancing the growing strength of the Franco-German alliance. This is one of the many opportunities of the Slovak EU Presidency in 2016.

Given that the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union is slated for the second half of 2016 – in a “trio” with the Netherlands (January – June 2016) and Malta (January – June 2017) – writing about its priorities is a very difficult task, almost in the realm of the supernatural. Especially because one cannot predict, with any certainty, how the EU will look in a few weeks time – much less in a few years. We cannot exclude the possibility that following recent disturbances, which began in the eurozone, unforeseen changes might be made to the Lisbon Treaty. Theoretically, the current institutional and legislative framework – a result of hard-fought battles – and the functioning of the EU might be altered, including a modification of the existing form and period of the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Even if we suppose there won’t be any changes, the difficulty of determining the contours of the Slovak Presidency remains, given the absence of any discussion on the subject by public experts. This is the case, in spite of the fact that the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is an axiomatic point in the Slovak political calendar. Due to the early elections in March of 2012, it is expected that both political and diplomatic preparations for this historic event will only commence after the new government assumes power. Therefore, the thoughts expressed in this article are only the reflections of the author’s private opinions.

One thing about which we can be certain is that the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union will have a greater impact on the position and reputation of our country in the European Union and the transatlantic community than the non-permanent membership of Slovakia on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2006 – 2007. To date, the place on the UNSC was the most serious litmus test of maturity and professionalism to be faced by Slovak diplomacy, still in its infancy. The Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union will be a significant political challenge that will test the administrative and technical capacities of Slovakia, and enhance the practical experience of civil service personnel, broadening their knowledge of the European agenda and helping to form their perceptions of the EU.

Slovakia has an advantage in preparing for its first performance in this role, given that it can draw on observations of the preparation and performance of the consecutive Hungarian and Polish Presidencies, as well as the experiences of other new member states – including Slovenia and the Czech Republic. In particular, the Hungarian experience demonstrated that it is extremely important for the presiding country not to draw too much attention to complications arising from domestic political developments or to make assertions that do not relate to the agenda of the Presidency. Such activities can be interpreted as being at odds with the commonly accepted values of the Union and thereby overshadow the otherwise positive outcomes. By contrast, the
leading Hungarian politicians and diplomats greatly appreciated the parallel Slovak Presidency of the V4 Group, which was quite dynamic and effective in supporting the priorities of the Hungarian EU Presidency. In 2011, the V4 Group of states experienced a revival and one of its most successful periods. The potential of the V4 “brand” was also noticed by the “big players” in EU institutions. We might also expect that Slovakia will offer its experience as an inspiration to other countries, especially to those countries that aspire to EU membership.

As far as the substantive preparation for the Presidency is concerned, it will be crucial to synchronize the drafting of the joint trio program, in which every member lays out its priorities for the actual EU work program. It will be important that the government takes into account the need to fulfill the program of the preceding Dutch Presidency, while respecting the evolving legislative work plan of EU bodies as well as the expectations and requirements of the EU Member States.

As the Slovak Republic will share the Presidency with the Netherlands, with which it cooperates in supporting the transformation processes in Tunisia, within the framework of the Community of Democracies, we may expect that five years following the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” will provide a meaningful opportunity to evaluate the tangible outcome of this movement and the role of the EU as a global actor. Participation of the Netherlands offers another opportunity – to strengthen V4 cooperation with the Benelux countries, thereby counterbalancing the growing influence of the Franco-German alliance that comes at the expense of communal decision-making. It should be in the interest of all small and medium sized EU countries to strengthen the communal method of dealing with problems and promoting EU goals. It can be expected that the Slovak government will elevate the voices of small states with limited influence on the so-called “big players” in the EU, especially through consultations with the V4 Group, the Benelux Union and the Nordic Council.

One can safely assume that the Slovak government will promote European policies through the common lens of Visegrad cooperation and Central European regional interest (energy and road infrastructure, cohesion policy, EU enlargement, Eastern Partnership and placing additional focus on Slovakia’s largest neighbor – Ukraine), under the new Multiannual Financial Framework and new European legislative. As with all other member states, Slovakia also sees its presidency as a unique opportunity to realize its foreign policy goals in the European Union, and promote itself as a dynamically growing country devoted to European values.

In this context, one of the potential priorities of the Slovak Presidency could be the issue of water security, which is increasingly problematic due to climate changes. Changes in the water cycle are resulting in extreme weather patterns, which have affected Central European countries in the past. For this reason, water will attain strategic security importance in the near future. In the future, water will perhaps become more important than crude oil. As a state with strategic resources of drinking water and the next President from the region of the Danube, Slovakia could indirectly follow up on the importance the Hungarian Presidency assigned to this issue five years ago and review the implementation of the Danube Strategy or even propose its re-examination, if appropriate. Keeping water quality high, securing the access of citizens to water, its effective conservation, and its efficient use must all become common goals within Central European countries and Europe as a whole.

Another issue on the agenda of the Slovak Presidency, with the potential for evaluation and revision in mind, could be progress in the implementation of the Roma Strategy and the related national strategies. Not only is the elimination of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination on a racial or ethnic basis at the core of EU values, but it is increasingly becoming an issue that is misused by the groups representing national populism, xenophobia and far right extremism.

Last but not least, topical challenges concerning EU sectorial policies may find their way in the priorities of the Slovak Presidency. These include issues such as energy security, and challenges in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). However, it would be premature to speculate about specific content. Much will depend on developments that cannot be known in advance. Ultimately, the choice of priorities, preparation and implementation will involve the ambitions of future governing political parties, which cannot be known yet. /\n
The author is Slovak Ambassador in Hungary.
Eduard Kukan defines himself as a "euro-optimist" and believes that in seven years the EU might be "back to normal". Elected to the European Parliament (EP) in 2009 (EPP group), he chairs the EP delegation for relations with South-East Europe and is a member of the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs. He spent most of his professional life as a diplomat, serving three terms as Slovakia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. In our conversation on the European future of the Western Balkans, he suggests that the V4 countries should not hesitate to coordinate their efforts.

A number of V4 declarations stipulate that the Western Balkans is a foreign policy priority and that the V4 contributes to integration of the region within Europe. How is this done? Well, in the first place, we regularly publish declarations. I believe we even mean them, and we are serious about the topic. But the practical engagement comes more from individual members of the Visegrad Group, not so much from the group as a whole. Activity toward the Balkans comes principally from Slovakia and Hungary, as I do not see such activity in Poland and the Czech Republic. During its EU presidency, Hungary was really active in the EU enlargement process, trying to finish up many things, for example in negotiations with Croatia. But on the V4 level, I do not see much joint, coordinated effort, perhaps with the exception of organizing conferences. Our leverage could be bigger if we acted jointly.

What prevents the V4 from stronger cooperation when the declared priorities toward the region are the same? Do the individual countries in question want to keep their respective successes – as in, “we the Czechs or Poles did this”? It seems there has never been enough political will for joint steps. This is not only the case with the Balkans – it is true in many other contexts. As you suggested, when the individual members of the V4 have the opportunity to have a moment of individual visibility, they prefer it to coordination. Very often, cooperation falls victim to efforts to increase the prestige or respect of individual V4 countries.

At the same time, the V4 keeps recommending to the Balkans that they should strengthen regional cooperation. Regional cooperation is in the first place reiterated by the European Union. In the EU’s evaluation of reform progress in the Balkans, their engagement in regional cooperation is an important criterion of progress. And here, certainly, the V4 experience might be an added value for Balkan politicians. As a practical example – look, we did it and it helped us.

Don’t they think it’s ironic that we recommend regional cooperation, while the V4’s own engagement in the WB is mainly on an individual basis? This is our own critical self-evaluation, and we need to pay attention to this. But the Western Balkan leaders do not analyze whether the V4 acts collectively or not – they focus on individual countries.

Is the V4 easily understood in Serbia or Albania? Not exactly. The Visegrad Group is composed of diverse partners. We have a big state like Poland, which has its own interests and sometimes gives them precedence over the joint action of the whole V4. So, our Balkan colleagues do not even expect we are going to be coordinated.

Looking at individual engagement – there are a number of activities going on at the level of states – what about civil society projects? Well, civil society cooperation certainly is important. And the civil societies of the Western Balkans need our support – to learn about the functioning civil society organizations in the V4. Here we need to do more. But sometimes our colleagues from Balkan administrations or parliaments tell us that there are cases when the donors just give resources to selected organizations, without being aware of what these organizations actually do, and it may happen that the resources are wasted or even misused.
Looking at the broader EU dimension of working with the Balkans, perhaps the major challenge remains the non-recognition of Kosovo by some member states. Given this, can the EU have meaningful policy toward the region? That's certainly the most difficult question. Yet, I believe we can. For example, at the moment there is a joint effort to eliminate the discrimination of Kosovars in visa-free travel to Schengen. Here, the European Parliament is certainly the most active body pushing the European Commission to take more action and our powers to do so have increased after the Lisbon treaty was adopted. Visa-free travel, in the end, is not a policy towards a “state” but towards people. So even in relation to Kosovo, I believe we can make positive progress. Of course, sooner or later the question of Kosovo’s status will come up. But the more pressing issue at the moment is broader: the EU’s credibility and real intentions to pursue a European perspective in the Balkans is in question.

However, at the level of rhetoric the promise seems to be firm – EU leaders have reiterated their pledge to the Western Balkans on every occasion possible. Take Montenegro, for example. They have fulfilled everything we wanted from them. And yet, they still do not have a date. The Council sometimes comes up with some other reason for delay. Such as “ok, they adopted the reform, let’s wait for implementation”. Or take Macedonia – a candidate country for years. The Commission does not even know what to write into its progress report. It is “they fulfill Copenhagen criteria”, year after year. If we say that if you fulfill this task we will open the negotiations, we should do it. Not “let’s wait six more months”. That is not credible on our side.

What is behind all the delays? The usual “enlargement fatigue”?
In my view, it is always concrete events concerning one of the larger EU players that slow the process down. For example, the candidate status of Serbia was postponed because of the recent clashes in northern Kosovo. Chancellor Merkel said that she could not explain to her voters that the EU would do something positive for Serbia when German soldiers are being attacked with stones. It’s always these little things and issues with individual countries. But not “enlargement fatigue”. There is a lot of talk on enlargement fatigue and sometimes it is exaggerated.

Let me come back to Serbia & Kosovo for a moment – can you imagine a situation that only one of them makes it to the EU, while the other is left out? Wouldn’t we be facing a situation similar to that of Cyprus?
It seems to me that the big players in the EU are extending pressure on Serbia to resolve the relations with Kosovo before moving forward with accession process. For example, recently a couple of German MP’s put it very bluntly in Serbia: if you do not recognize them, there are no negotiations. However, at the moment there is not any formalized EU position on the recognition – just individual statements. But it is logical to expect that this will have to be solved before the accession.

Several public opinion polls have recently shown that euro-optimism in the Western Balkans is on the retreat. How can we explain this? Is it that the process has been going too long?
They are tired of waiting. Particularly when they have not always been treated fairly. And of course, perhaps it was not expected that all reform processes would be so closely monitored and controlled by EU institutions. Even though the enthusiasm has fallen, the EU perspective is still a strong factor for all these states. You can see it in election results – the political forces interested in joining the EU usually win.

But then, don’t the internal EU crises weaken our foreign policy and capacity to be engaged with neighbors?
Of course they do. That is also the reason why some activities, also towards the Balkans, are less intense. The slowing down of negotiations and longer waiting time for aspirants is one of the consequences of the tough challenges we are facing on the domestic front.

How long might this last? None of the EU crises – economic, loss of confidence in politics and politicians – is about to be resolved in the near term.
It will take longer – my estimate is seven years. That could be the time to bring us from the worst back to normal. I am a euro-optimist. I believe the European project will not fall apart. But let’s be honest: we are still only thinking, and when we come up with something... We have in fact not yet implemented a measure that would really improve the situation. /
An academic career in the social sciences will become the privilege of a few, usually better-off segments of the shrinking middle classes. These pressures will serve to amplify the monopolies inside the field and further preclude any possibilities of solidarity for effecting change.

DESPITE SOME INSTITUTIONAL REARRANGEMENTS (MOST NOTABLY THE REAPPPEARANCE OF SOCIOLOGY AS AN INDEPENDENT DISCIPLINE) AND PURGES OF SOME TOP FIGURES, MANY PRE-1989 TENDENCIES CONTINUE TO INFORM THE ROMANIAN SOCIAL SCIENCES, ESPECIALLY POSITIVISM AND METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM. WHAT WAS NEW IN THE POST-89 ERA WAS THE ANTI-COMMUNISM THAT BECAME
influential in research, introducing a triumphalist narrative that portrayed the fall of communism as an external evil that was defeated — but not as a complex social system that had to be understood through research. This anti-communist perspective (hegemonic in historical writing) had numerous consequences for the social sciences as well, not least of all the legitimation, under the catch-term “mentalities”, of a pseudo-scientific approach that found an explanation for the present in the mechanical causality of the communist past.

This high emphasis on “mentalities” was also possible because of the methodological nationalism prevailing in the Romanian social sciences. Once the “nation” became the unit of analysis, it was almost natural to invoke ahistorical essential features pertaining to it as a collective homogenous entity, either positively or negatively. Obviously this tradition pre-dated socialism itself, having first emerged in the 19th century efforts of nation-building and, concomitantly, of science-building that assisted and reflected upon this process at the same time. During socialism, this approach gained different momentum, spurred by the political interests of the Party, and generated the ill-fated intellectual phenomena of protochronism — in short, an attempt to identify Romanian precursors in many fields of natural and social sciences in order to demonstrate unequivocally the genius of the Romanian people. Such ideas managed to permeate almost all forms of scholarship and continued to retain an important hold in many areas well after 1989, in the post-Soviet process of “nation-building”.

But by the turn of the millennia, global capitalist forces shaped the Romanian social sciences more than these internal legacies. In this text, I would like to present some of these changes, many of them fully contemporary. I will do this primarily by referring to some of the key changes in the Romanian society during the past two decades, exploring their impact on the social scientific and academic field.

A DOUBLE BIND: POLICY AND MARKET
The first decade of post-communism was marked, like in many countries of the former Eastern Bloc, by a process of accumulation and dispossession, entailing the transfer of property and assets from the state into private hands. This process presupposed not only a brutal dismemberment of socialist industry but also led to increased social polarizations, pushing large segments of population previously employed in the industrial sector downward and outward. People at the wrong end of this process were pressured into securing other forms of livelihood, either by going back to agricultural work or through migration (sometimes both). After 2000, an estimated three million people migrated from Romania for work, mainly as unskilled or care laborers. Concomitantly, the process of privatization coupled with deindustrialization significantly altered the bases of the economy, requiring a new emphasis on services, trade and finance, that, in turn, required a different type of labor force. These local processes were nonetheless highly entangled with global processes of capitalist accumulation and were ushered in by the same ideology of neoliberal economics that have been transforming the core of the capitalist system since the 1970s. As such, far from being simple “natural” transformations pertaining to the post-socialist transition, these changes reflected trends that were global in scope.

All these dynamics spurred a significant series of social effects, not least in the academic and scientific field. Just like in many other sectors, the state significantly retreated from funding education, including research. As a result, universities and research institutes became increasingly dependent on attracting funds from private sources. This downsizing entailed opening up the gates of the universities through the lowering of admission criteria and simultaneously increasing tuition fees. This not only significantly dented the principle of universal access to education, but also steered the universities into simply providing students with the skills required for swift integration into the job market. This process was further accelerated by the implementation of the Bologna process, whose full range of effects cannot be properly addressed here. Dependent on a student’s funding and private actors, the universities had to steer away from research or at least to adapt their research topics to the new environment. In sociology, this response entailed a palpable shift towards market-oriented research, including surveys for marketing purposes, demographic analysis, samplings, interviews and a turn toward “media studies”. At the same time, a large number of sociologists and political scientists (exponents of a discipline that specifically emerged after 1989 as a means to create new cadres for the new regime, therefore principally geared toward public policy rather than scientific research) organized their research and expertise for the benefit of political parties and government. Some entered politics more or less openly and helped with electoral campaigns, political programs and voting strategies. Others provided a type of research backed by the halo of science that was clearly a politically charged policy (pension cuts, for example).

This brings to fore another central feature of the contemporary Romanian scientific community, the generally un-critical relationship to power (political or financial). This form of dependency severely limited the options for a real critical stance of the scientific community, thus presenting yet another level of continuity with the state-socialist period.

NEW TOPICS AND THE EU
Nonetheless, the dependency on the market for funding had its positive ramifications, pushing research into socially relevant areas. In particular, I refer here to a large series of studies on migration that made a significant contribution in mapping this large-scale social process mentioned above. This work was complemented by an equally important effort, this time by anthropologists who followed migrants back and forth as they moved between their new and old worlds, exploring their life struggles and trajectories. Roma studies deserves a serious word of mention as well, since it represents one of the most important topics of research in the local social sciences, a fact underlined by a newly established PhD program. To be sure, all these topics were spurred as much by the concerns of the European Union, which offered most of the funding, as by genuine, local scientific interests. In fairness, since it was not entirely market-oriented, these areas of research offered a wider degree of scientific autonomy in which researchers could articulate a series of critical views, including criticism of EU policies on ethnicity and gender, for example.

Facing simultaneous downward pressure from the global academic market and its hegemonic and colonial effects in the peripheries like Romania, expressed through publication patterns
and international networks of scholarly peers, and upward pressure coming from young local researchers and academics (most of them schooled in the academic institutions of the West), new topics of research, and new ideologies and methods increasingly made their way into the local scientific parlance, including: urban studies and urban ethnographies; gender studies and issues dealing with body and sexuality; labor relations and new subjectivities specific to late capitalism; and more marginally, attempts to indigenize within social sciences various forms of Marxism, post-colonial thinking and critical analyses of global capitalism. Meanwhile, scholarship with a local tradition (for example the Bourdieuan analysis of fields, as well as research on modernity, nationalism and state formation) continued to hold their ground, although they too had to keep up with the changes and move into interdisciplinary directions, particularly towards history – thereby raising significant challenges to dominant anti-communist and nationalist paradigms.

INTERNAL SPLITS: GENERATION AND IDEOLOGY

Obviously, the field of social sciences is far from homogenous and is in fact split along various lines: the practitioners are differently positioned in this field according to class, generation, ideological commitments and other dispositions, thus being differently affected by the sweeping processes mentioned above. Because of space constraints, I will only discuss two of the most important lines of division structuring this field: generation and ideology. “Generation” is always a tricky concept, given that it might evoke simple struggles between the old and the new approaches or between divergent modes of professional formation. However, in the Romanian context this generational struggle seems to express deep-seated forms of class struggle, since generational belonging reflects unequal relations with respect to securing a livelihood. As it stands, older professors benefit from the advantages of established networks both within and outside the scientific milieu to centralize significant powers and institutional positions, creating veritable forms of monoply within the field. Thus, students and young researchers have to face the uneasy situation of submitting to these rules or facing the ax. The field itself is highly polarized, structured by hierarchical vertical relations and competing horizontal relations among students and young scientists. Direct confrontation with authority and horizontal solidarity are not absent but not frequent either.

This generational (and class) divide overlaps with splits driving the ideology and politics of research. As already mentioned, the field itself is deeply integrated into a global neoliberal structure with few possibilities for autonomy or significant dissent. Thus, the core of the neoliberal doxa – ranging from efficacy, transparency and market relevance to individualism, rationality and technocratic positivism, - deeply shapes the presuppositions and methods of most research projects. In the local community, the split might be portrayed in the standard terms of quantitative and qualitative debates, or between “objective” and “partisan” science (both a legacy of state socialism, as much as a genuine struggle in the present). But in point of fact, the real split is between those who seek to question the very epistemic foundations of the disciplines (and their division of labor and methods within this arrangement), while pinpointing to their necessary entanglement with power (writ large) and thus introducing a more reflexive turn in their métier, and the others who seek to preserve the idea of the neutrality of science and the utopia of a value-free, un-political and objective form of research, which thereby silences the double dependency described above. These positions are obviously more nuanced in practice. And yet, the broad effects of these antagonisms even extend to the formation of the Society of Sociologists from Romania – a network of scholars more robustly linked with the global academic scene, both in terms of networks and in terms of research interests. Also not immune to this divide is the revival of the Romanian Society of Cultural Anthropology, which seeks to establish an autonomous local field of anthropology embedded in transnational networks.

FUTURE?

What might plausibly be expected in the near future, given these tendencies and forces? Because of immense pressures to cut state spending in the new context of the post-2008 financial shock, the double dependency on power and markets will only be exacerbated. It is already absolutely clear that the university and research in general are rapidly becoming institutions for producing public policy for the immediate use of power. Theoretical considerations and critical research are portrayed as an uninteresting luxury. An academic career or a life in the social sciences will become the privilege of a few, usually better-off segments of the shrinking middle classes, but once there, they will simply have to follow a predetermined agenda of research. These pressures will serve to amplify the monopolies inside the field and further preclude any possibilities of solidarity for effecting change. As a consequence, researchers will be disgruntled but unable to mobilize, while class antagonisms will continuously be displaced, either as generational battles or as struggles against the “returnees”. By this I mean to refer to the large number of graduate students that will seek to return to Romania once they have finished their studies abroad, unable to secure jobs in a declining environment. While some might be absorbed by the local economy in various positions of petty technocrats, most of them will put pressure on the already existing academic infrastructure in order to obtain jobs. This might entail demonstrations of solidarity with young exploited researchers in order to effect change, or, most likely, the returnees will force the cost of academic labor even lower. In this background, the ideological and methodological questions will be muted and will become less of an issue publicly. The aforementioned societies of sociologists and anthropologists will perhaps continue to grow within the existing system, but there are also signs that many of their members might be ready to seek forms of social research and science outside the current model and in interaction with other social forces seeking to oppose the current enclosure. Whether they will succeed or not will have an impact far beyond the scientific field.

The author is currently completing his PhD thesis in anthropology on the class politics of history in post-socialism at the Central European University. A Fulbright Visiting Scholar at City University of New York (2011/2012) his interests include theories of history and memory, class politics and urban studies.
Recognizing similar healthcare problems across the V4, the doctors’ unions decided to work out common strategic plans for co-operation. Public campaigns in Slovakia and Hungary were largely inspired by the previous achievements of doctors in Poland and the Czech Republic. This unexpected cooperation within the V4 has come as a relief to patients in a region threatened by brain drain in previous years.

Exclusive reportage accompanied by photos of health care from the four countries.
The system is about to collapse!” The doctor sighed, apologized and turned back to my results before continuing: “It’s going to collapse. I myself don’t care that much. I’m going to retire soon, but what about my colleagues? The nurses are even worse off, with the day and night shifts, overloaded with work and underpaid, and I can’t imagine what might ease the burden they carry.”

Disregarding how embarrassed my allergist made me during the examination, he is far from alone in his profession. Indeed, in recent years many doctors have expressed increasing desperation about the state of health care and future of public hospitals.

A similar story is playing out in practically all the countries of the V4: exhausted, overworked doctors and nurses, working lengthy shifts with extra hours for pitiful compensation. Students of medicine have a distorted image of their prospects and patients are losing trust, as the health service has not improved reasonably since 1989. Only the costs have raised and the problem of informal payment is still on the table. Substantive structural changes have not taken place and health care has entered a period of crisis – budgets are tight, hospitals are indebted and thousands of doctors leave their countries each year for material reasons.

In this apparent dead-end, doctors have begun a series of campaigns to improve work conditions and raise salaries, with the eventual goal of reaching two times the national average for young doctors, and three times that for specialists. Still far below the “Western standards”, this would nevertheless be enough to keep them at home. Like a rolling strike, with the wave moving across countries rather than sectors or units – strikes began in Poland in 2006 and continued through 2007 and 2008. In 2010, massive campaigns kicked off in the Czech Republic, where thousands of doctors deposited a dismissal notice. This was followed by a similar action in Slovakia in late 2011 and finally in Hungary. Drawing on the similarities in these post-communist countries, the unions of the V4 decided to support each other in the campaigns and negotiations.

**PUSHING AND PULLING**

After the fall of socialist regimes, the field of medicine was burdened by relics of the authoritarian past, particularly damaging was the baggage of low wages and anti-competitive conditions. Toward the end of the 90’s, doctors in Central Europe not only earned considerably less than their Western colleagues, but also lagged behind other occupational groups within their home countries. This resulted in new waves of emigration, reaching a peak after accession to the EU. Open borders and simplified administrative procedures have attracted tens of thousands of health care professionals from the region – surgeons, psychiatrists, anaesthesiologists, obstetricians and professionals from other areas. The most popular destinations are the UK, Germany and Scandinavia. Even France, Aus-

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**About the photos:** Photos were taken in the city hospital in Sieradz (provincial town in the center of Poland). When Sieradz was a county town, the hospital was a major medical center in the area. Today the situation is more complicated. The hospital is aging and many of its units require repairs. Some have been modernized with the participation of the European Union, but the money in the budget is still insufficient.
Zuzana Halanova completed Art History studies at Comenius University in Bratislava with MA in 2003. She worked as a journalist in various major Slovak media after studies. Since 2010 she has been enrolled at the Institute of Creative Photography at Silesian University in Opava, studying photography and working as a freelance photographer. She is primarily concerned with documentary and reportage photography.

About the photos: I visited a hospital in Poprad, a small town below the High Tatra. Despite the overall negative state of our healthcare system, this hospital has not been pulled down by the burden of debt. Perhaps this is due to the fact that it was transformed into a joint stock company holding, which is reflected in the incremental improvement of the hospital’s facilities and infrastructure. Although many wards have been transformed by shiny new equipment, some still seem frozen in time - the 70s (when the hospital was opened) seems to cling to the walls.
ria, Spain and Switzerland (otherwise restrictive concerning emigrant workers) welcomed doctors from the former Eastern bloc, attempting to fill shortages in small towns and marginal regions, expand weekend hours and increase their respective supplies of specialists.

The reasons for leaving are generally pragmatic. To quote the Hungarian psychiatrist Dr. Edina Sugár: “When I decided to leave, my monthly salary was about 120-122 000 HUF, while the balloon payment for my apartment had gone up to 112 000 HUF.” Doctors’ salaries in Hungary are the lowest in the V4. But even Czech doctors can make 4-5 times more in neighbouring Germany or Austria. Besides issues of compensation, poor working conditions are also responsible for the massive healthcare exodus. Citing Dr. Sugár once more: “In our hospital we had regular shifts of 8-hours, but we were obliged to provide attendances of 16 hours plus administration, after a regular work day, which made shifts as long as 26-28 hours. A physician can be obliged to take up to two attendances a month, but we were encouraged to “volunteer” for further attendances. Moreover, the payment for an attendance is 70% of the regular salary. I was the only person who didn’t sign this – I was not about to offer extra work for 1 Euro/ hour. Not that it mattered – I had to do it anyway.”

The problem with working hours is also well known in Slovakia. Jana, a student of medicine, describes the state of affairs at Comenius – considered the finest medical university in Slovakia: “There is a lack of staff, the working hours are long and our professors don’t have enough time even to teach us!” The Slovak Doctors’ Union (LOZ) warns that while the EU directives suggest no more than 192 extra hours per year, Slovak doctors face approximately 500-600 additional hours each year, a situation that puts both doctors and patients at risk.

Beyond working hours and wages, the movement of doctors is also motivated by better conditions and the opportunity to gain professional experience. An instructive example in this case would be the migration of Slovak doctors to the Czech Republic. While there are minimal differences in wages between the two countries, the Czech Republic is home to better facilities, including a higher number of large and well-equipped hospitals. In Western Europe and Scandinavia, physicians are given better supplies and provisions – there is no threat of a shortage of appropriate medications and hospitals do not need to cut costs on available examinations. In short, in these regions doctors do not need to consider financial implications when ordering tests.

If a physician decides to go abroad, they usually turn to one of the numerous recruitment agencies specializing in health care. The procedure is rather simple – the basic condition is a diploma in medicine. It is easier to get a job as a specialist but this is not a requirement. It is preferable that the candidate has good language skills – usually an intermediate level of English or German is sufficient.
The first interview takes place on location, and after having received a positive review the candidate is generally invited for a second interview, already at the prospective hospital of employment. If necessary, a language course will be organized. The agencies also provide free language courses for spouses, as well as help with administration, obtaining accommodation or organizing schooling for children.

There are rarely problems with acceptance in the foreign country, among patients or colleagues – as the flood of Eastern European doctors is neither exceptional nor new. As Dr. Súgar explained: “There are three psychiatrists in our hospital – one Norwegian, one Polish and me – I mean specialists, because the resident doctors are usually Norwegians. Otherwise, we have a Hungarian dermatologist in the hospital, one of the anaesthesiologists is Austrian, another is Hungarian and there are two Serbs. The paediatrician is Polish – what can I say, they’re used to it.”

Physicians usually leave in their 30s-40s, at the beginning or peak of their careers, and they are rarely interested in returning. The doctors who leave with their families are welcomed into the safety net of Western European or Scandinavian social systems and it is unlikely they would return to the same conditions once they have escaped.

**ROLLING CAMPAIGNS**
The reactions of respective governments have been criticized as shifting recklessly between denial and rage. Handling a complex economic and social problem as a matter of individual choice has pushed the question of responsibility aside. By the time the campaigns of the unions began to unfold, it was already too late, and talks look increasingly like battles rather than negotiations.

Polish health professionals went on strike in 2006. In the years following, the doctors joined the national strikes of public employees, embracing teachers, bus drivers and coal miners. The union reported strikes in 230 of Poland’s 800 hospitals. Nurses occupied the territory in front of the Prime Minister’s office in 2007. They managed to put up 150 tents and demonstrated under a very telling banner: “Stay Healthy, We’re Leaving!”

In Poland, the outflow of medical staff started in the late 90s, which led to a severe lack of human resources in hospitals. At the same time, the country was also a destination for doctors from the former Soviet Union, especially Ukraine. But this influx slowed after accession to the EU, as Anna Stradza, head of a Polish recruitment agency explains: “The procedure of recognition of a Ukrainian doctor’s diploma has become more complicated and time consuming.” The discrepancy between incoming and outgoing physicians continued to expand, at least until the doctors managed to negotiate better payments in 2008-2009.

The Czech union leader, Martin Engel, blames corrupt political leadership, citing this factor as the primary reason why his union is opposed to the privatization of hospitals. In the Czech Republic, the campaign was preceded by dramatic statistics in 2007-2008, showing about 300 doctors leaving the country each month, primarily for Germany.

**Daniel Poláček** Born in Prague in 1979, he has been passionate about photography since 2000. In particular he is interested in photojournalism and landscape photography. He currently studies photography at the Institute of Creative Photography of the Silesian University.

**About the photos:** This series of photos comes from an older hospital in Prague, which has been in operation for the past 80 years.
and the UK. In early 2010, Czech doctors launched their massive campaign “Thanks, We’re Leaving”, where more than 3800 doctors, that is about one fourth of all hospital doctors declared their resignation and put together a list of 13 reasons for their exodus. And the government finally agreed to raise doctors’ salaries by 5000-8000 KC/ per month, with promises of further raises.

Angry rhetoric also characterised the campaign of the Slovak doctors’ union, which has employed clear references to regime change – claiming that it wants to dismantle the current, malfunctioning social security system, just like the corrupt and malfunctioning authoritarian regime was dismantled in 1989. The Slovak minister of health care, Ivan Uhliarik, accused LOZ of taking patients as hostages. The response came quickly and simply: “It’s the political elite that has been doing so [taking hostages] for years”. During the 2 months of the campaign, “Let’s Rescue Healthcare”, about 2500 doctors (including half of all the doctors in Bratislava and 100% at a particular ward in Nitra) signed a resignation notice. At the dramatic height of events, Ivan Uhliarik agreed with LOZ to raise the salaries of doctors in several steps and to stop the privatization of state hospitals.

The Hungarian situation did not look much more promising – the Health Portfolio proposed that doctors would be obliged to stay at the hospital where they received their specialization for four years, in order to prevent them from leaving the country. This plan did not make it through, and no agreement has been reached in the meantime. Following their Slovak colleagues, the Hungarian doctors also decided to organize a joint “quit and leave” action, with more than 2200 individuals joining the campaign “For Viable Healthcare” by early December. These figures are but the logical extension of an ongoing process, considering the data of earlier years – in 2006, 520 doctors asked for their certificates for employment abroad at the Doctors’s Chamber, while in 2009 and 2010 this number rose to 1500.

**Visegrad on the move**

Recognizing the similarities between the problems of health care in the V4, the unions decided to work out common strategic plans for co-operation. In fact, the campaigns in Slovakia and Hungary were to a large extent inspired by these frameworks and the previous
AGREEMENT OF JOINT ACTIONS – AN EXCERPT FROM THE VISEGRAD CHARTA

→ QUIT AND LEAVE: If necessary, the “quit and leave” action will be undertaken in all four countries simultaneously.

→ WORK THROUGH RULE (WTR): There are a number of regulations in practice in our countries that are neglected, due to the need for continuous and uninterrupted treatment procedures, namely that a limited number of patients are financed in specialist care. Had we kept these regulations, our capacity to care for patients would be extremely reduced. To be able to create pressure, we suggest applying these regulations in a very minute, organized and complex way.

→ THE STRIKE OF DOCTORS

→ JOINT ACTIVITIES IN THE LEGAL FIELD: In case of injustice, we have a better chance to solve legal problems before the European Union and the European Court.

successes of doctors in Poland and the Czech Republic. As Dr. János Bélteczki, leader of the Hungarian Doctors’s Union, explained: “There is a lot we can learn from the Czechs. They already worked out strategies for campaigning and public appearances and can advise us in the deadlocks and the various stages of our actions.” In October of 2011, the unions of the four countries established the Visegrad Charta, which sets out basic principles, including plans for action (see Box article). A concrete step in this co-operation was the call by Czech and Hungarian unions for solidarity with the

Imre Varga is 35 years old and currently lives in Budapest. He works as a freelance photographer, taking pictures for foundations and magazines, etc.

About the photos The pictures was made in the Pal Heim Children’s Hospital. Photos (first and second) show doctor analysing a child’s leg after a dog attack. Third photo is about blood sampling.
Slovak doctors during their strike, which meant, in practical terms, a denial of help to hospitals affected by the "quit and leave" campaign.

The results of the uncompromising stances and actions taken by Visegrad doctors are already reflected in the statistics. In Poland, wages for doctors in the public sphere were raised, in some cases, by 60%, and the outflow of doctors dramatically slowed. During the first year after the EU accession, 2800 doctors left Poland, but by 2010 this number had dropped to 325. By the first half of 2011, less than 150 certificates for leaving were issued. Even if there are specialists willing to go abroad, the recruitment agencies are rather busy finding short-term occupations, such as weekend shifts and locum jobs.

It is important to note that payment issues are not fully sorted out and there are still worries that the promised improvements will not be achieved. It also needs to be stressed that the results still don’t cover the whole of the health sector and that the doctors are a group with significantly better representation. Nurses, assistants and other employees did not necessarily benefit from the actions. On the contrary, five nurses in Poland went on a hunger strike in the spring of 2011, for example. However, the brain drain and uneven movement of health workers is slowing down and the prospect of better earnings and work conditions may potentially keep health specialists at home, thereby raising the level of trust amongst partners – health care employees, the government and – not the least of which – the patients.

The author is a cultural anthropologist writing her dissertation on post-socialist urban movements.
SOLEMNITY AND IN CENTRAL AND EUROPEAN URBAN
The urban code of Central Europe has its own specificity. The experience of rapid and forceful modernization in the last century went hand in hand with a search for language and customs that may surprise Western Europeans. Is it possible to explain this experience through a literary work – namely the Polish urban legend of *Zły* by Leopold Tyrmand?

Amongst the unintended consequences of Central and Eastern European accession to the European Union, particularly conspicuous was the invasion of our streets by young Britons, flying over for “stag weekends” or partying bouts. Locals found their ways truly disagreeable. But their offensive demeanor in public can only be partially attributed to their notorious pub culture – with its slogan of “drink ’till I pass out”. Jan Nowicki, an actor and Polish arbiter elegantiarum, regularly described British tourists as the “new barbarians”, nothing short of hooligans or even plain criminals. Accustomed to a different regime of public space, young Britons simultaneously broke and revealed some of the tacit rules undergirding Central and Eastern European urban life.

Partying Britons stood out in the local landscape for at least two reasons: first, whatever pub or bar they went to, they rarely sat down – instead consumed their beverages standing in a tight swarm. In such an arrangement they disrupted the predominant spatial order of the region, comprising human bodies engaged in a conversation while seated and immobile. They brought with themselves elements of the uniquely British working-class public culture, which differs substantially from the Central European coffeehouse tradition. According to Jürgen Habermas, this tradition became the very linchpin of civic life in continental Europe. Whereas the British working class was made largely in pubs and taverns, as described by E.P. Thompson. First of all, this was due to the fact that
these spaces of provided for unfettered political contention and heated, often overheated, debate. Secondly, the zeal, chaos and mob-like atmosphere of pubs triggered a “civilizing” backlash from the working-class aristocracy that coalesced around the teetotal movement. Perhaps because Britain is still the world’s only true class society (in the sense that “old-school” class analysis remains congruent with realities in Britain), it is also one of the few countries were the working classes developed a sense of cultural pride and independence, and where the rank-and-file frowned upon elites – rather than looking up to them. Consequently, unlike in Central and Eastern Europe, many Britons feel relatively unencumbered by highbrow “rules” of behavior in public, urban spaces.

A similar difference can be observed between the Netherlands and Belgium. Sights that terrify Polish urbanites, like street camera footage of a naked foreign tourist strutting on the main square of Wrocław, an event that made headlines some months back, would leave most Dutch people unimpressed. In the Netherlands, a drunken man urinating in the middle of the street is not likely to raise eyebrows. By contrast, Belgium is far more continental in its intolerance of such displays. The key difference here is the absence of the cultural brunt of the nobility. The Netherlands is perhaps Europe’s most bourgeois society, culturally established in the “golden” seventeenth century. It was not pressed to marry into the aristocratic house and court culture in order to assume the reigns of modern society. The Dutch also “missed out” on the nineteenth century – when most continental “national cultures” were forged largely out of trickling down highbrow elements, and when, as described by Richard Sennett, the modern city life of Europe germinated. One of the key components of that development was the ushering of “silence” into the public realm. In this sense, the “unruly” Britons or “blunt” Dutch (as they often describe themselves) remained pre-modern, and the way they jell together in urban space is similar to the public life of the ancien regime, where it was still in good form to talk, or even shout, during theater and music performances, where the demarcation line between the active performer and silent and passive audience was very much blurred. Today in the Netherlands, “silent services” on trains remain silent only in theory, and I have never seen a person admonishing others for not keeping quiet. Finally, their disrespect for silence constituted the second feature that singled out British tourists from the urban landscape in Central and Eastern Europe.

City life in Poland is marked, as the historian Błażej Brzostek put it, by its “solemnity.” A foreign visitor described the antebellum street life in Warsaw thus: it “is not good form here to whistle or sing in the street. People do not talk on the tram. Nobody laughs. Nobody is joyful and nobody smiles. Even whomes strut the streets puffed up as if they were matriarchs”. Although somehow exaggerated, he captured the lineaments of the emergent urban order well, when old social and class divisions, hitherto anchored in rural life, entered the urban turf. The key notion describing this development is chamstwo. Coined by the nobility, it used to be the derogatory notion reserved for the most destitute of the peasantry. Today, it has lost its class connotations and describes rude and disrespectful behavior in public space. Of course, Poland is not alone in this. Vernaculars in the region are replete with similar terms: khamstvo and selyuk in Ukrainian and Russian, seljačina, primitivizam, and malogradjanstina in the dialects of the former Yugoslavia, paraszt, tirpák and tahó in Hungarian, ţăran and mitocanie in Romanian, goimoba and mari-azhoba in Georgian, hulvát, vidlák and sedlák in the Czech and Slovak and selianin, seliak and seliandur in Bulgarian. In most cases, these terms imply a peasant untutored in “proper” urban life, and have been key in the symbolic violence meted out toward new post-war urbanites by the elites, often with gentry background, who established the hierarchical foundations of urban order and public space in the region.

In order to understand this process, one needs to turn back to the 1950s and 1960s. Leopold Tyrmand captured this formative epoch in his novel The Man with the White Eyes (1955) – perhaps Poland’s only true piece of urban literature. It describes how life in Warsaw was disrupted by a mysterious superhero dubbed Zły. He appeared out of nowhere whenever “normal” law abiding urbanites were troubled by “hooligans”, beating villains to pulp. Tyrmand reveled in describing the vibrant chaos of postwar Warsaw – a “wounded city” largely reduced to ashes during World World II. Materially a ghost of its pre-war equivalent, it was a wholly new beast in social terms. Because most investments during Stalinism went into
industry, the urban environment was a feeble structure, un-
able to contain the human crucible of Poland’s momentous
transition from rural to urban life. Tyrmand describes with
a true brilliance all the quotidian moments when the rules
for the new urban order were established. Warsaw, he wrote,
resembled a giant and overcrowded tram. And when packed
like sardines and no longer able to tame their seething anger,
“people’s most important instincts and character traces sur-
faced,” and they got into fights. The young “hooligans” were
the chamstwo who refused to play by the new rules, not only
disrespecting the iron principle of seniority (young people
were, and still are, expected to give their seat on public trans-
port to the elderly), but also occupying seats for the disabled
and telling the indignant passengers off. Or they cut in line.
Or they threw things at by-passers just for the heck of it. In all
these situations, Zły entered the stage, rescued the innocent
victims and paid the perpetrators back for their “mindless vio-

Zły represents the super-ego of the new, urban society.
Although he breaks the law by resorting to violence, he is re-
ered by the mass media and even by the police. Yet, nobody
has ever seen him, except for his piercing, white eyes. His sil-
houette was nondescript; he was neither tall, nor short, wear-
ing a gray coat. He was, in other words, the oft-mentioned “av-
erage citizen,” whose gaze, amplified by the beatings, became
the new disciplining factor in Poland’s post-war cities. Today,
the structural violence underpinning the urban games of de-
meanor and deference are less apparent, and in some cases they
have moved from custom and morality to law proper. In a city
in Ukraine there was recently a motion to introduce fines for
those who declined to give their seats on public transit to the
elderly. Contemporary cities are no longer dominated by “hoo-
ligans”. They are dominated by “average citizens” who share
Zły’s moral code. We take this regime for granted. And this is
precisely why so much moral indignation has been triggered
by the British tourists, who are like an uncanny visitor from
Poland’s past, when the rules of the urban game were not yet
set in stone, but actually were being negotiated in the millions
of daily situations described by Tyrmand, when the urban cauld-
ron was still teeming with spontaneous, if unruly, life, that has
not yet been confined by a structure. /

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of the editorial board of Polish quarterly Res Publica Nowa.
LIFTING THE FOG: CENTRAL EUROPE FROM THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

I “wrote” Central European fiction before I read it
Because my father was an immigration lawyer who helped World War II refugees come to the States, I knew that Central/Eastern Europe existed. His office was as lively as the steerage of an old steamship: Orthodox Jews in yarmulkes and peyes, grannies in babushkas, sultry women with long legs andtooled eyebrows (he brought the Gabor sisters to the U.S.) sat thigh to thigh behind a low wooden railing by the secretarial pool waiting to be interviewed, comforted and rescued.

Some of his clients became his friends. Without my being aware of it, I got to know a band of Central European survivors – beefy men (and some women) with unplaceable accents, many with numbers on their arms, whose home was the whole planet as they shipped cheap plastic toys from Japan to Venezuela, bananas from Venezuela to the States, steel and oil from the States to God knows where. They were a cheerful bunch. They liked rich food, cigars, strong perfume and sitting around in my parents’ living room drinking good Scotch. They all exuded the survivor’s blend of caniness and self-pride.

But my experience was the exception. If anything at all, most Americans thought of “Central Europe” as a land of perpetual fog where people walked around with their coat collars pulled up to their ears. Czeslaw Milosz’s Captive Mind (1953) – the first book to tear a rent in the Iron Curtain – reinforced that impression. I was too young to get much out of Milosz’s dense prose and elegant generalizations, but I remember his stern face on the book jacket, and the blurbs that set up an excessively simplistic dichotomy between the intellectual freedom of the West and the stagnation of the East. (It would be decades later that I’d hear Witold Gombrowicz express a similar reservation, asking in his Diaries, 1953-88, if Milosz had “made a sufficient effort to extricate himself from the dialectics that have shackled him.”)

Anyway, it wasn’t politics or political theory for which I was longing. I wanted books and movies that cleared away some of the fog and let me see what people behind the Iron Curtain actually thought and how they behaved.

A trickle of movies started in the late 50s and early 60s, increasing in the lead-up to the Prague Spring: Wajda’s Ashes and Diamonds (1958), Polanski’s Knife in the Water (1962), Jancsó’s The Red and the White (1967), Forman’s Loves of a Blonde (1965), Menzel’s Closely Watched Trains (1967), and Kadár’s The Shop on Main Street (1965). All were small, understated auteur films, although they were more modest and self-ironic than the French New Wave (La Nouvelle Vague). Unlike the Hollywood movies that we grew up with, the directors focused on scaled-down, intimate moments, and the acting was so “naturalistic” that many of us found the movies banal. What could American audiences grasp, for example, in the petty tensions between the characters cooped up in the sailboat of Knife in the Water, except that they were exactly the kind of ungenerous feelings we felt but to which we could not admit? And how were we to read a “war” movie like The Red and the White, which felt like the antithesis of Hollywood epics – hardly any dialogue, no good guys or bad guys, characters on camera appearing for not even long enough to have names (though somehow we got a sense of their personalities), cruelty so arbitrary that executioners wandered off-screen with their victims, and we never saw any of them again – yet we came away feeling that what we’d just witnessed was exactly what war must be like.

In a word, these films seemed more grown-up than the ones with which we...
were familiar with. The worlds they created were based on experience rather than fantasy. Ironic, wistful, and even world-weary, they embodied the novel idea that complex moral situations could be more interesting – even more entertaining – than sentimentality and escapism. Except for a few young American filmmakers like John Cassavetes, who lived, the easy intimacy between classmates trying to move up the ladder was a collection of stories - Laughable Loves (1974). For me it was a revelation. The sensibility behind the stories was cool but not cold, aloof but tender; rather than landing squarely on a subject, it seemed to hover around it. The narrator was omniscient – but a most curious kind of omniscience, a voice that mocked itself and the very possibility of being omniscient.

If not exactly out of time, Kundera’s characters existed in a time with invisible horizons. The past was largely meaningless, and the future promised to be no worse or better than the present. And yet, in a sense, time was all there was! There were no physical descriptions, no hint of nature as a panacea, no violence or insanity, both of which would imply a world of ideals and value judgments. Kundera’s world – not exactly “Bohemia”, but not exactly not - was a world without clear norms, where behavior was everything, and in which the characters lived in quiet isolation, trying to create their lives as they went along. Tragedy stood outside the dome that surrounded them, but the poignancy of the stories seemed to come from the absence of tragedy; the only distant sound was laughter, sometimes mocking, sometimes genuinely amused, most often wistful.

I make no claim for Kundera catching the zeitgeist of pre-glasnost Central Europe, or of the difficulties of adjusting to the West after the raising of the Iron Curtain. But if you listen closely, you can hear in Kundera’s writing echoes of Polanski’s pessimism, Konrád’s compassion, Borowski’s sense of the banality of evil. For me and many other Westerners, Laughable Loves and Kundera’s books that followed seemed both exotic and oddly familiar.

All this happened a long time ago. Nowadays tourists fill the streets of Prague and rave about the Gellért Hotel in Budapest or Kraków’s Baroque architecture. But I have the feeling that we know less about these places than we did when the flurry of books and films made its way to us past the censors forty years ago. Due to the shrinking of the publishing industry, changing fashions, and the loss of a universalist attitude that the best of Western thinkers prided themselves on having, we hardly get any books and films from Central Europe anymore. The monochromatic fog may have lifted, but the tourist hype that has replaced it is just as opaque. If anything, Kundera’s vision seems to have extended westward. Beneath the blare of our electronic noise-makers, we all seem to be living in quiet isolation.
Jindřich Štreit
from the collection Chlévská říňka
The encounter with Jizchak Katzenelson’s famous poem “Song of the Murdered Jewish People” proved to be decisive for Zoltán Halasi. After translating the poem into Hungarian, he continued his work in the form of research and is currently striving to recover and capture the East-European world of the Yiddish language, which was destroyed during WWII. In this conversation, we talked about his research, which will materialize in his book Footnote.

The book you are working on began with your translation of Jizchak Katzenelson’s poem, “Song of the Murdered Jewish People”. What were the circumstances in which Katzenelson wrote this poem?

Katzenelson was a professor and poet from Łódź, and he spent most of his adult life writing plays and occasionally poems. His works were published in Hebrew. He was a Zionist and convinced socialist, but he was also familiar with religious culture, as he taught Bible classes in the school where he worked. Interestingly, or perhaps we should say tragically, in 1939, after the Germans invaded his country, this school became the headquarters of the Gestapo. From this point forward, Katzenelson had to stay in hiding. He went to Warsaw, where 400-500,000 Jews were living in the ghetto. He started to write more and more poems, increasingly (and at last only) in Yiddish. He thereby changed his poetic language. The vernaculars of the Warsaw ghetto were Polish and Yiddish. So Katzenelson, after having written his poems, read them to those who lived in the ghetto. During the years he spent there,
he lost his family and relatives, except for his elder son. In a condensed form, he lived through all the events that were witnessed by Polish Jewry. Those events that he did not experience himself, he at least heard about, since he was a member of the group of intellectuals that had tasked itself with gathering and maintaining a historical record. In short, Katzenelson knew a great deal. Some parts of his poem are astonishing. It seems unusual that he was able to gather this vast amount of knowledge about events in Poland from within a seemingly isolated environment.

Gathering this knowledge had a specific purpose for him, since he was aided in escaping from the ghetto in order to testify about what was transpiring.

Exactly, his friends sent him from the ghetto to the outer world, so that he, as a literate person, could testify to the situation. At last, he left Warsaw and was taken to northern France with a Honduran passport, where he was put in a so-called transit camp in July of 1943. In this camp, prisoners were held for a potential swap. There, in Vittel, he desperately wanted to write about what had happened. At the beginning, he couldn’t work due to fatigue and the monstrous humiliations of his circumstances. Moreover, he felt that he did not possess the words to express what he had seen. It was during the fall, while deportation was looming, that he began to write the poem in which he wanted to tell everything. He finished it in January of 1944. Soon after, in March, he was deported and murdered at Auschwitz.

The poem consists of 15 verses, and is quite varied for its genre. It starts out as a traditional song with minor modifications and then changes into “a news chronicle song”. This latter form is an ancient genre used to publically narrate events. Katzenelson could not know how the war would end. He wrote on behalf of the exterminated Jewish people, for the Jewry living overseas and in Palestine, and humankind at large. There are also dramatic elements in the poem, when for example, he describes the death of Adam Czerniaków, the leader of the Warsaw ghetto.

The poem also employs the non-literary form of testimony. With incredible precision, Katzenelson describes what happened to him and to the others around him in the Warsaw ghetto.

Sometimes you can feel that the lines are staggering because of the pain, though not in the bad sense. They reflect the poet’s trepidation.

In this respect, you have to keep in mind where and when the poem was written, in the midst of genocide. So when he testifies about what is going on, it amounts to a political message transgressing the limits of literature.

Exactly. While I was writing my book, it occurred to me that almost wherever Nazism threatened the Jews, their very first reaction was that they had to document what was happening. Even if they would not survive, the documents should testify.

How did Katzenelson’s poem survive?
He made several copies. One was smuggled into Palestine in the handle of a suitcase by one of his colleagues, who was exchanged for a German prisoner. Another copy, in a bottle, was buried by the trunk of a tree and later recovered by a friend who survived. This is why it could be published in Paris in April of 1945, even before the war ended.

The book you are working on bears the title Footnote. How does it relate to Katzenelson and his poem?
Initially, as I used to do in other cases of translating, I wanted to write an essay about the author and the circumstances in which the poem was written. Pushing deeper into the subject, I found myself overwhelmed by the reality that was before me – not only the murder of people but the annihilation of a whole culture. And it was this non-existent culture that continued to capture my attention and efforts. I felt that writing once more about how the people were killed would amount to another act of murder. Instead, against the intentions of the murderers, I set out to bear witness to what has been lost.

What characteristics of Jewish culture are we talking about?
Besides orthodox and traditional Jewish culture, there was a robust, modern secular Jewish culture, which, because it was polyglottal, was open to the whole world. By the beginning of the 20th century, this culture was about to create institutions, just like other European nations had been striving to do earlier. The particularity of this culture is that it was not confined to one country. It did not have a country as such. The world of the Yiddish language, broadly speaking, comprised of territories from Moscow to Berlin: there were newspapers published in Yiddish in both cities. But being more precise, it was a population living in small towns, from Belarus to Central Poland, and from Riga to Odessa.

Your presentation of this world is highly unusual.
As I said, when I began to understand what had been lost, I knew that I had to render it visibly. But the question was how it ought to be done? I’m not a historian, nor am I a novelist. I therefore wanted to provide some kind of intellectual approach, because culture, which is a conscious reflection on the world, cannot be depicted in a naïve or fairytale-like manner. In this spirit, I decided to select some segments of the culture in question. I was surprised by the richness of the educational system, the plethora of schools and intellectual currents, which often complemented or sometimes overlapped each other. Because I did not want to repeat myself, I had to

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invent a different form for each segment. In each case, a real person represents a selected part of the Yiddish world. For example, an employee of the Synagogue informs the parent of a child, new to the town, about the Jewish educational system, while the architectural values of the wooden synagogues are highlighted by a contemporary art historian, in the form of a written request for monument preservation. This means that my account is not retrospective. Therefore, my work does not contain what subsequently occurred. Had I not treated life, I could not have spoken about the destruction.

By depicting the Yiddish world through real people and cultural forms, your work approaches documentation. Yet it remains fiction, given that this request was never actually written, and also your account of the research on starvation in the ghetto is your invention.

This genre is usually called documentary fiction. The people, the context, and the forms are real, but the narration is fictitious. There was indeed research conducted in the ghetto on mass starvation, in a situation when isolated masses were exposed to the consequences of the lack of food for a very long time. Of course, I did commit transgressions with regard to historical facts. For example, a guide on the Warsaw ghetto could not have been written in 1939. It was a shameful area, inhabited by poor people.

I have the impression that in this way you avoid the dominant form of depicting the past, according to which nothing should be forgotten, and everything must be preserved. Am I right in saying that these artistic decisions made it possible for you to not only preserve but also elaborate on the material in question?

Absolutely. Writing is preceded by a much longer process, during which I reflect upon historical material. The final outcome only comprises 5 percent of the material gathered. However, what I do is related to Katzenelson and his poem.

To express this in the language of the theater, I would say that I provide an illumination, which opens up the space for the poem. I provide a background text.

Katzenelson’s poem does not remain within the confines of literature. Do you think that your work is also somehow political?

For me, writing is solving a series of aesthetic problems. For example, I was wondering if I could use eloquent language in the dialogue between the rebels of the Warsaw ghetto. Pathos, this idealistic voice was inherent in the period, but it has been doomed by history. However, it is also true that I write this book against the culture of violence and the romantic vision of history, which is still with us, and according to which the individual owes absolute loyalty to the community, a loyalty that is always defined and manipulated by its leaders.

Translated by Balázs Berkovits

Zoltán Halasi, born in 1954 in Budapest, is a poet and translator. He has published three books of poems and one volume of essays. He has translated poetry, prose and drama, including works by Goethe, Kafka, Canetti, Jelinek, Różewicz, Szymborska and Venclova. His poetry was awarded the Attila Jozsef prize, and his translations have been honored with the Hieronymus prize.

he two decades of Czech literature that followed the regime change should not be dated mechanically. We can consider the publication of Long Distance Interrogation (Dálkový výslech) – a book in which the journalist Karel Hvížďala interviews Václav Havel – as the meaningful beginning of this period. The book came out in December of 1989, shortly before Havel became President of Czechoslovakia. And we could date its end to November of 2011, when the poet Ivan Martin Jirous, legend of the Czech underground, died. His death marks the end of the rising tide of Czech literature.

The early 1990s were defined by the repayment of debts. Literature, which had been divided into three streams – official, exile and samizdat –, once again became a unified body of Czech literature, and was able to re-establish contact with other national literatures by means of translations of previously banned authors. Perhaps symptomatic, the first freely published book was Long Distance Interrogation, whereas the title that was published in the highest quantity (about half a million copies) was the decades-delayed reprint of Talks With T.G. Masaryk (Hovory s TGM), where the writer Karel Čapek conversed with the first President of Czechoslovakia. It’s additionally symptomatic that the book was lying on bookshop shelves for a long time and was later offered at a highly discounted price. Those days could be captured with a single word – chaos.

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literature has lost its political and social accent because there is currently a cadre of professional, democratically elected politicians

But I don’t intend to remain at the level of general history here. I’d rather like to try and select a few personalities from the two decades that have just ended. The selection is partially personal – it reflects how I’ve been “reading” the post-communist period.

THIS HAS BEEN MY LIFE
In my bookcase, only two books have wide enough spines to accommodate a portrait photo. The Czech poet Ivan Diviš (1924-1999) is on one, and the writer and translator Jan Zábrana (1931-1984) is on the other. Their diaries attracted a lot of attention in the first half of the 1990s. In 1992, the Book of the Year in the Lidové noviny survey was An Entire Life (Celý život) by Jan Zábrana, and two years later the award went to The Theory of Reliability (Teorie spolehlivosti) by Ivan Diviš.

Zábrana’s and Diviš’s diaries opened the flood-gates of authenticity in Czech literature, which had been closed for four decades by Communism. We could say that diaries, memoirs and other biographical texts were dominant during the first decade of freedom. Their strong sense of subjectivity and accentuated authenticity formed the opposite pole or complement to the collective reflections of the past, which were gathered in the press. They played an irreplaceable role in the post-revolution anamnesis, when the soul of the nation was recollecting memories that had been ousted from the past. At the same time, these two diaries made it clear, right in the beginning, that biographic literature has its limits. They can turn into an egotism of distorted judgments, and their suggestiveness doesn’t necessarily relate to morality directly.

Apart from their general appeal, a volcanic urgency in Diviš and a life frustration in Zábrana, the two diaries have also become exemplary because they deal with two substantial experiences of Czech authors of the second half of the 20th century. Zábrana’s diary suggestively captures the existential situation of a banned man of letters (after 1968, Zábrana could only publish translations). Ivan Diviš fled to West Germany in 1969, where he worked as an editor of Radio Free Europe. His Theory of Reliability therefore captures the destiny of a Czech writer in exile.

ABLE TO EARN A LIVING
If the new order in Czech literature could be given a single face, it would be that of Michal Viewegh (1962). The transformations of that face are as follows. In the early 1990s, the greasy complexion was framed with a waterfall of small black curls (in those days, even Jaromír Jágr had a perm). At present, Michal Viewegh is a good-looking metrosexual – after all, as the best-selling Czech author of the past two decades, he has to look after his image.

Michal Viewegh is somebody completely different from the aforementioned poets. The only thing they have in common is that he is also a child of his time. In 1992, he achieved a great success with his novel The Blissful Years of Lousy Living (Báječná léta pod psa). The contradiction in the title refers to the years of “normalisation” (regime consolidation after the Soviet invasion in 1968), which, for the main character, were also the years of his childhood. They were filled with joyful blitheness, but also of his first conflicts with Communist reality. His combination of humour, irony and hyperbole earned him critical acclaim and appealed to readers. In an essay dedicated to the author in the monthly Host (3/2011), Miroslav Balaštík puts it the following way: “The normalisation story of Kvido’s cute family arrives in a time when the attitude to literature changes radically. After two years of the post-revolution euphoria when both readers and critics were passionately discovering the ‘hidden face of Czech literature’, the enthusiasm cools and the interest in the work of forbidden authors tails off fast.” In other words, let the old shabby lions return to their cages, because there’s a new male in the arena.

Michal Viewegh’s star soon broke in two. While the interest of readers grew, critics were no longer impressed. In the Czech literary environment, Viewegh has become the prototype for an author who is able to earn a living, but disdained because he has turned into a mere craftsman. The dramatic tone with which the reviewers return to this theme with every new book by this author, may perhaps demonstrate only one thing: that a book is still not viewed as mere goods.

IN ANOTHER ORBIT
Some time ago, I was sending some editorial material to Milan Kundera. It included one book: The Unbearable Lightness of Being. In the Czech Republic, it was only published in 2006, twenty years after its original appearance in France. I enclosed a short note for the author, asking him not to bother with a dedication. But I couldn’t help to add that instead I would appreciate if he could tell me his three favourite words. He didn’t unveil them to me. I didn’t expect to turn to this theme with every new book by this author, may perhaps demonstrate only one thing: that a book is still not viewed as mere goods.

When The Unbearable Lightness of Being was published here, it was a literary event. The press was full of headlines like “The Unbearable Lightness of Literary Construction,” “Un(bearable) Disputes over
Kundera, or also “Kundera Disappeared in a Flash” (that is, from bookshops).

In the post-communist period, Kundera has held the exclusive position of the only world-famous author of Czech descent. He both has and hasn’t been part of the local literary environment. But his position at home has been no bed of roses. In October 2008, Adam Hradil caused a great uproar in an article in the weekly Respekt, where the author deduced from a single police document that in 1950, Kundera denounced one Miroslav Dvořáček, who subsequently spent 14 years in a Communist gulag. Nevertheless, long before that Kundera had committed an offence in the eyes of part of our cultural community by departing from the orbit dedicated for Czech writers and moving from a different sphere, from which he, moreover, refused to return after the regime changed. He re-planted himself from Czech soil to the European substrate, both physically and philosophically.

DEATH OF AN AUTHOR AND THE END OF SOLIDARITY
Jan Balabán (1961-2010) was perhaps the most acclaimed Czech author of the first decade of this century. His texts are compact and sad. After he unexpectedly passed away at the end of the decade, interest in his work has grown. Balabán represents the most important stream in Czech literature, i.e. – in simple terms – contemporary authors. It should be said that the post-communist period has produced a lot of interesting names and works. To name just a few: Jáchym Topol (City Sister Silver [Sestra], Chilly Land [Chladnou zemi]), Petra Hůlová (In Memory of My Grandmother [Paměť mojí babičce], Plastic Three-Bedroom Apartment [Umělohmotný třípokoj]), Emil Hald (Of Parents and Kids [O rodičích a dětech], Rules of Funny Behaviour [Pravidla smíšeného chování]), Martin Ryšavý (Travels in Siberia [Cesty na Sibiř], Vrach [Vrač]), Radka Denemarková (Money from Hitler [Peníze od Hitlera], Kobold).

A week after Jan Balabán’s unexpected passing, his funeral took place in a Lutheran church in Ostrava. Jan Balabán was one of the few truly noticeable Czech writers who often made himself heard in the public sphere, but nobody bothered to attend the service. I didn’t see any other writer, except for Balabán’s friends from Ostrava. Not a soul from the weekly Respekt, where Balabán was a regular contributor until his death.

I’m afraid that this observation is symptomatic in some way. The Czech literary field of the first decade of the 21st century is lacking in solidarity, it is broken up and disintegrated – like a document opened in the wrong format. In comparison with the days of the dissent, but also with the early 1990s, there’s a huge difference in the extent to which literature is understood as a common effort. Today’s authors are drawn closer to the metaphor of the individual life path, if not literary career, and perhaps the only time when this path intersects with the paths of others is when handing over the keys of residential apartments or at award ceremonies.

THE PRIVATISATION OF LITERATURE
I have mentioned several very different authors who in some way or other represent different modes of literature from the past two decades. However, literature is not just about authors. Instead, a closer analysis of the literary field and its institutions would show how the position of authors has changed over the last two decades. The most significant change is certainly the loss of the social prestige of the field and consequently of authors. The author is no longer the nation’s conscience, nor its spokesperson. What I described as the accentuating of an individual life path or literary career can be systematically labelled as a consequence of the privatisation of literature. Pavel Janáček, head of the Institute for Czech Literature at the Czech Academy of Sciences even recalls, in an interview for Host (3/2011), that in the liberalism frenzy of the 1990s, a metaphor appeared suggesting that literature was something like gardening – a private hobby which deserves no support from the State and which, seen from the other side, has no relation to society as a whole.

I suppose it all depends on the point of departure. For some, the changes of the past two decades are first of all a restoration of normal relations. Literature has lost its political and social accent because there is currently a cadre of professional, democratically elected politicians, as well as space for public discussion. In this sense, the only thing that has happened is that literature got rid of the functions that had been unnaturally grafted onto it, and it can therefore return to its original vocation. The question remains whether contemporary literature will now have to grapple, in an equally sophisticated manner, with the world of economics as it previously did with politics. Here, too, it’s necessary to make choices between fundamental alternatives which are irreconcilable in a long term and these decisions have to be taken on a daily basis.

Translated from Czech by David Klimánek

The author is a Czech writer and critic.
had a friend who used to work as a social worker. Her job consisted in preparing released convicts for their return to society. Once she was assigned an inmate who had spent nearly twenty years behind bars because of a murder committed in 1989. Integrating this man into ordinary life amounted to something like going through a sci-fi story with an obscure denouement. The convict was supposed to enter a free society, facing democracy instead of socialism, a developed private sphere, commercial competition, individualism and the possibility of travelling to most European countries without a passport. In addition, a job had to be sought out and there was a high risk of never actually finding one. The list goes on: civil society, free elections, supermarkets, consumerism, palaces of commerce, ATMs, credit cards, dozens of banks and insurance companies, mortgages, omnipresent advertisement, blatant social discrepancies, information society, computers, cell phones, internet, social networks, internet banking, GPS, multiple TV channels, technical innovations and an overwhelming supply of seemingly necessary gadgets. Virtual reality. Globalization. A different country to live in. The city in which the convict had lived wasn’t any longer its capital. What’s more, his country had joined the European Union, a community based on very complicated rules of partnership. A different currency, different goods. Lots of goods.

Slovak society, which had been set free somewhat earlier, could cope with the changes gradually. On the other hand, these changes were much more numerous than those concerning everyday life. We experienced Mečiarism and the risk of international isolation at the moment when our neighbors were about to join the EU. The voluntary sector emerged, but the culture became commercialized. Independent media appeared, but we were taken aback by their progressive tabloidization. The book as an article of commerce. Organized crime. The death of the author. A new millennium. Big Brother.

ILLUSIONS CONCERNING DISSENT
For two decades, we have constantly created the illusion that our society has achieved something. It has joined the West. Europe. It has come from somewhere. That place was isolated. Any freed convict must first admit that nobody is actually expecting his release, and that other people feel rather uneasy about his arrival. Regardless of whether he was rightfully convicted or not, his experience is untransferable. In Kertész’s Fateless, we read something about the disillusionment ensuing the return from a concentration camp. In a sense, something of this kind also happened in Slovakia and other post-socialist countries, in their cultures and literatures. Two different expectations were present in Slovakia just after the change: the first one concerned publishing suppressed authors and un-official literature, the other one was related to the acceptance of literature coming from abroad. In both cases, we have fallen short of these expectations. The early nineties were still under the sign of the older generation: Tatarka, Sloboda, Vlíkovský, Kadlecík, Mitana, Dušek, Hrúza, Johanides, Moravčík, Šikula and Blažková. And there were the lone runners: Štrpka, Repka, Laučík and Ján Buzássy. The Trnava group. Beside the old generation, the early nineties were also connected with previous dissenters, especially Martin Šimečka and Oleg Pastier. With the progressive attempts to limit human rights after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, which were related to the arrival of Mečiarism, the expectation started to fade out. Vílikovský’s works, written in the seventies and eighties, were published in 1989. Tatarka’s work was completed in 1989, because of the author’s demise, and the publication of his books was dragged out by copyright disputes. We lost Rudo Sloboda in the nineties, and in the subsequent decade we lost Šikula, Hrúza, Johanides and Laučík. Most disappeared too early. These sobering experiences were also marked by the fact that some writers who had been able to save their face in socialism didn’t really master the period of Mečiarism, accompanied by nationalist moods and social conflicts emerging after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The difference between the Czech Republic and Slovakia also became apparent in literature. The illusion of Slovak dissent was unmasked – compared to Czech dissent, it barely existed. The situation in Slovakia was paradoxically similar to Hungary. As explained by the writer Péter Esterházy, the fact that socialism also involved certain islands of freedom resulted in a society that coped with the period in question in a terribly complicated way. No clear dividing lines could be traced. But who could recognize this in the period of Mečiarism, when the media were infested with extremist appeals, such as “ Tanks onward to Budapest”? Underground culture was practically non-existent in Slovakia, and the grey zone usually represented the unofficial scene. The importance of these authors rarely extends beyond the boundaries of Central and Eastern Europe. But
literature can often surprise us in unexpected places, especially when it deviates from standards. In this context, the writer Ján Rozner’s book Seven days till the burial, published posthumously nearly twenty years after November ‘89, appeared rather unexpectedly. In this book — describing the seven days between the death and burial of Rozner’s wife, the translator Zora Jesenská — Slovak literature partially expressed its reaction to the régime, a reaction that had elevated enough to face these challenges and lacked self-confidence in this respect. Its creative approach displayed shock and resistance. The reviewers, expecting the arrival of something that was coming rather slowly, were cold in their reaction. Essays titles such as Commentaries on the prosaic (de)generation or P(ri)oses after 1989 are indicative of the atmosphere. Critics of poetry and prose refused to play the younger generation’s games. In prose, the short story was dominant. Secondhand Bookshop, a collection of short stories by Tomáš Horváth, epitomized this tendency in its self-indulgent play with the works of the world literary canon. The direction taken by poetry was captured in the project Generator X, undertaken by a group of authors who debuted in the nineties with the publishing house Drewo a srd. This initiative was a generational rejection of authorship and the lyric subject, through work which was both collective and anonymous. In their respective collections, Peter Macsovsky, Peter Šulej, Michal Habaj, Nora Ružičková and Martin Solotruk attacked traditional interpretation, proceeding in a way that had previously been seen only once in Slovak literature in connection with the debut of the generation of lone runners of the sixties, authors who were almost immediately banned. In contrast with the prose writers, the poets of the nineties were able to find their generational critic in Jaroslav Šrank who, by his research into the works of these authors, was able to reevaluate the outcomes of that time’s criticism. Peter Macsovsky preferred to leave the country. With his new novel Shaking the Skeletons, his return attracted a great deal of attention and is symptomatic of the tendencies of the new millennium.

**RETURN OF LOST SONS AND DAUGHTERS?**

The return home was somewhat gradual, and it didn’t take a direct course: Peter Biľy by way of Spain, Michal Hvorecký through Iceland, Germany and beyond, Svetlana Žuchová in Austria, through France and Slovenia in the short stories and the novel of Ivana Dobrakovová, and finally through Africa in Marek Vadas’s short stories. The prose of the new millennium has begun to explore the real world and certain risk takers have even dared to venture back to their home country. At present, novels overshadow short stories. Márius Kopcsay, Monika Kompaniková, Jaroslav Rumlpli, Viťo Stavarsky, Veronika Šikulová, Jana Beňová (and, of course, Balla, Peter Macsovsky, Pavol Rankov, Marek Vadas, Ivana Dobrakovová, Svetlana Žuchová) are the most prominent figures in the younger generations of contemporary Slovak literature. Their stories are overtly situated in places such as Nové Zámky, Levice, Petržalka, Prešov, Košice, and even a workers colony in Bratislava in Monika Kompaniková’s The Fifth Ship. With these new developments at hand, we can begin to read the literature of the nineties in new ways.

Translated from Slovak by Marek Sečkař

The author is a Slovak poet, writer and critic. Organizer of the Anasoft Litera book prize
writing in Hungary is never independent from social-political circumstances

ORSYOLYA KARAFIÁTH

 clichéd as it may sound, the literature of the post-communist countries cannot be understood in depth without scrutinizing their history prior to the regime change. As such an analysis would go beyond the limited aims of this essay, I would like to briefly introduce the topic by way of two essential terms: dependency and independence. For centuries, Hungary was oppressed by different great powers (the Turks, Habsburgs and Soviets), and literature was the only bearer of the ideal of freedom. This was no different during the decades of the Socialist regime. Free speech faced censorship and therefore literature naturally engaged in politics and raised taboo topics. Indeed, the entire address of the rally engaged in politics and raised taboo censorship and therefore literature naturally engaged in politics and raised taboo topics. The texts do not speak for us and on our behalf, but simply to us. Since writers do not perform any public roles any longer, or if so, just in very limited ways, socio-graphic writing about for example social injustice, becomes weightless and insignificant. What’s more, interest in traditional literary genres declined radically (a trend which continues). Whereas the previous regime could boast about (often artificially inflated) immense print runs, literary works published now cannot achieve even a fraction of previous sales volumes. As the critic Csaba Károlyi pointed out at a round table discussion on “Regime change and literature” in 2002: “The fact that poetry volumes may interest 1000 readers, but is printed in 500 copies. You can draw the conclusion that the value of literature has deflated, but on the other hand you can consider it as being in its proper place, more or less, and those who read it are actually really interested in literature.”

DESK DRAWERS, SHORT STORIES, AND POST-MODERNISM – THE NINETIES

After 1989, everyone (readers and critics alike) expected that some secret masterpieces would appear. But as László Mártón aptly remarked: “Following the regime change it turned out that there had been no hidden masterpieces in the previous regime. As of 1990, no such masterpiece has been published that the previous system had not wished to publish. There may have been suppressed writers, but there were no suppressed writings. And the same goes for literature of exile. Győző Határ’s work was introduced, Márai was rediscovered, but no extremely great thing has been brought from there.” Obviously, the desk drawers were not empty. The regime change brought some officially unacknowledged life-works to light. For example the writings of Katalin Kemény, the wife of Béla Hamvas, as well as the books by cross-border authors or the complete works of underground culture representatives and the Neo-Avant-Garde – the latter manifested not only in textual forms but also in performanc-es and happenings, for example those by Miklós Erdélyi or Tibor Hajas. “As if the new Hungarian literature came for-
ward from Péter Esterházy’s cloak. Although Sándor Mészáros’s observation is arguable, it is indeed an important pre-figuration. In the mid-nineties, long narratives were superseded by shorter stories. Taken from a post-modern point of view, homogeneous narration became fragmented. This also brought about the prominence of language-constructed subjects. In a rather simplified way, the character and nature of the text assumed the role of the story itself. The greatly influential prose-writers of this era, among many others, include: László Garaczi, István Kemény, László Márton, Ottó Tolnai, Endre Kukorelly, Gábor Németh and Ferenc Szijj. Needless to say, there is an ongoing important critical debate regarding the writings published in the nineties, and it can be easily ascertained that their basic characteristic is fragmentation. “As I see it,” said László Márton, “the post-modern is some kind of current state of the world; the depressive synthesis of apocalypse, catastrophe and deviant averageness. Not too appealing a concept, but still, this is the only one I find credible.”

BACK TO THE STORY
At the end of the nineties, another powerful tendency set in motion, namely a return to the "traditional" prose writing. Storylines with the traditional narration are once again the main focus, and there is a noticeable aspiration for some kind of greater form, a grandiose or epic structure. The authors in question have been translated into many languages, achieving worldwide success: László Darvasi, György Spiró, Attila Bartis, Pál Závada and György Dragomán. The only reason why Imre Kertész doesn’t feature on this list is that Fateless was originally published in 1975.

Finally, without accounting for everything, I have to mention other authors and works of indisputable significance. Here I am thinking of Lajos Parti Nagy, Krisztina Tóth Zsuzsa Rakovszky, László Krasznahorkai, Ádám Nádasdy, János Térey, János Háy, Sándor Tar, Ottó Orbán and Imre Oravecz. I really could go on, but I suppose this draws a pretty clear picture of how diverse and far-reaching Hungarian literature has been since the regime change. And of course, if it had not been for the regime change, the great “regime changing books” would not have been born, like Revised Edition by Péter Esterházy or the so-called father-books (including Captivity by Spiró or the relevant books by Péter Lengyel, Géza Bereményi and Péter Nádas), whose central motive is facing the past. Literary historians more or less agree that the regime change (and the previous political system) provides ample material for literature. This is also a social question, as has been suggested at the beginning of this article. Writing in Hungary is never actually independent from topical social-political circumstances.

Translated by Metta Karafiáth

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Nothing has happened in Polish literature for the last twenty years would obviously be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, I am inclined to propose this risky thesis. Nothing has occurred in Polish literature since 1990 – at least, in some sense. Obviously, the significance and number of “events” in question is dependent on what we place under the heading of “literature”. As the field of literature may be defined in several ways, it is impossible to speak from one privileged perspective (unless we merely intend to give voice to individual whims). We may, for instance, evaluate Polish literature as represented in mass media criticism (publications concerning books and writers) or the opinions passed by literary critics in academic circles. Then again, we may try to define its significance against the backdrop of global trends in the literary industry or seek out signs and references suggesting continuity with the Polish literary tradition. And although literature can be placed in the warehouse of popular culture, we also have before us the choice to treat literature as art – an activity that presupposes the capacity of literature to transcend its own limits – which is, frankly speaking, the definition I am most inclined to support. So as to avoid being misunderstood, my exaggerated claim - that nothing has happened - is an attempt to foreclose attempts at dis-
we are late moderns – late on arrival

cussing what has happened over the past twenty years in Polish literature. If we treat this literature as art, then we may say that there has not been any event that hasn’t been seen before, and yet there has been, all the same, a flood of seemingly original and insistently advertised novelties. After all, we are late moderns – late on arrival.

CELEBRITIES OF A SLIGHTLY LOWER RANK
Literature is no longer an activity that shows the way by opening horizons to a wider public, not even in Poland where writers have traditionally been considered spiritual leaders. Setting aside the writers of older generations (such as Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz), no Polish writer of the last 20 years has been perceived in this role, nor any of them could aspire to such a position. The promotion of new artistic trends was even more non-existent. Writers gradually got used to playing the role of celebrities of a slightly lower rank than musicians or actors, and they have, for the most part, mastered this inferior role. Indeed, both writers exhibiting conservative tendencies and those who were moving with the times were all willing to unceremoniously imitate whatever pop culture promoted. They were attempting to balance the appearances of independence with an illusion of “novelty” in their works. This was possible because the cult of novelty is enshrined in the logic of advertising (new is always better) and social changes (novelty is always on its way, even if it is just a newer version of the old). In point of fact, novelty is relative appellation. At present, even minor changes in products are used as pretexts for telling the public that something is “brand new”. In which case, a writer can attract undue attention by merely flirting with new ephemera. But this kind of publicity is short-lived, and it was precisely these minor events that dominated Polish literature after 1990.

But already by the mid-90s, the theory suggesting that the geopolitical changes of the late-80s would give rise to an equally momentous artistic breakthrough, as certain outlets of the Polish media and circles of literary criticism were propagating, was no longer defensible. As it turned out, an event of significance was also political in its implications – the emergence of second circulation literature in Poland in the second half of the 70s. By contrast, the emergence of third circulation literature in the 80s and the artzine circulation that reached its peak in the 90s were related to politics to a far lesser extent. This later development was the product of a broad movement of cultural privatization, an anti-system movement that concerned every system, as such, not exclusively the “wrongful system” of the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL), as some saw it. By “cultural privatization” I mean to underline the unprecedented scale of passive and active participation in culture, largely thanks to new communication technologies and effective marketing strategies. The institutional result of this movement was a flood of cultural magazines in the 90s that were published by different associations and supported by local governments, replacing the centralized state circulation of weekly and monthly magazines, which largely disappeared with the dawn of the Third Republic of Poland.

Instead of the young and competent hands, which were supposed to emerge out of nowhere as was postulated at the beginning of the 90s, individuals who had already terminally existed on the literary scene gradually entered the stage. This generally refers to the writers of the 50s and 60s. Jerzy Pilch definitely turned out to be the most famous of this group, but if we treat literature as art, then poets such as Marek K. E. Baczewski, Miłosz Biedrzychki, Cezary Domarus, Darek Foks, Andrzej Sosnowski and Grzegorz Wróblewski, poet and a novelist Adam Wiedemann, novelists Izabela Filipiak, Janusz Rudnicki, Piotr Siemion and Adam Ubertowski made their marks.

CULTURAL PRIVATIZATION
Ten years later, at the beginning of the 21st century, the attack on the World Trade Center and its global consequences, including Poland’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan, failed to provoke the imagination of Polish writers. In a repetition of formulas from previous decades, the engagement of writers appears to be the effect of political opportunism and a servant-like treatment of literature, rather than the product of autonomous intellectual choices. When it comes to artists, the initiative belongs to the visual arts, with writers trying to creatively cooperate with them – noteworthy in this regard is the project by Zbigniew Libera and Darek Foks, *Co robi łączniczka* (What Is a Messenger Girl Doing, 2005). In Polish literature, the noughts (2000s) were marked by a continuing privatization of culture already known from the 90s. This trend was supported by the growth of the Internet, which led to the emergence of many fairly popular web-
the engagement of writers appears to be the effect of political opportunism and a servant-like treatment of literature, rather than the product of autonomous intellectual choices

sites interested in capturing the popularity of social-networking portals and to facilitating publication of these works. An evident sign of the progressing privatization of culture is the notable fragmentation of the publishing market. Currently, there are several thousand Publishing Houses in Poland, and although many of them attempt to publish literature, only a few do so on a significant scale. When it comes to writers born in the 70s and 80s, the following names are worth noting for artistic reasons: novelists – Ignacy Karpowicz, Dorota Masłowska, Michał Witkowski, and poets – Julia Fiedorczuk, Adam Kaczanowski and Jakobe Mansztajn.

Certainly, the era that began four decades ago will not last forever. Something must happen in Polish literature, eventually. I assume this will be a certain breakthrough. With this number of writers we could easily experience a final catastrophe.

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PS. Predicting which of the currently active writers might achieve a literary breakthrough, or at least become the symbol of such a breakthrough, would be too risky. While I lack the appropriate tools to measure the degree to which the literature surpasses itself, I would venture to say that it would be unreliable to make such judgments or predictions based on the popularity of the names present on the market. Rather than creating a ranking of talented friends, I will mention the names of several authors who are perhaps not overrepresented in the media, but whose next books I would like to read.

M.K.E. Baczewski (1964) is a poet, novelist and author of radio plays. He published nine volumes of poems, a wide selection of which was published in Fortepian i jego cień (The Piano and its Shadow, 2010). Being an accomplished poet, M.K.E. Baczewski has a promising future in prose writing, as proven by his short stories published in literary magazines. What I appreciate in this author is his sense of humor, fondness for paradox and pun, all accompanied by subtle erudition.

Cezary Domarus (1965) is a poet, novelist and musician. Several years ago (2007) a selection called Stany własne. Wiersze z lat 1992 – 2007 (Personal states. Poems form 1992-2007) was published. However, the author published two novels back in the 90s. If he were to publish another, I would certainly be interested in reading it. Who knows, maybe the oniric realities created by him in Caligari Express and Istoty (Beings) that only partly resembled the world that we know from the media will develop in unexpected directions?

Adam Kaczanowski (1967) is a poet, novelist, and author of five volumes of poems with recently published Szkielet małpy/Szept (The Skeleton of a Monkey/Whisper, 2010) and two novels Bez końca (Without End, 2005) and Aversion (Aversion, 2006). Kaczanowski is a careful, if not ruthless, observer of the world of pop. He has an excellent eye for detail and rather successfully constructs literary realities. This kind of combination is therefore highly promising.

Piotr Kofta (1973) is a novelist, and the author of two selections of short stories Piękne wieczory (Beautiful evenings) and Bura małpa (Dark-grey monkey), both published in 2004. His short story Rytm (Rhythm) formed part of an album "Affliction XXIX II MXMVI" by Blindead band (2010). If he wrote a novel, it might provide an interesting version of a rather familiar plot with the atmosphere smelling of cigarettes and alcohol. Nonetheless, it would likely be more melancholic and non-sarcastically auto-ironic.

Miłka Malzahn (1971) is a novelist, singer, lyrics writer, and radio announcer. She published two novels Baronowa Późna Jesień (The Baroness of Late Autumn) and Królowa Rabarbaru (The Rhubarb Queen), and two selections of short stories Nie ma mono (There is No Mono) and Fronasz. Each of her books adds a slightly different meaning to the category of women's writing, although one would think that it is impossible to offer any new tricks in the game of allusions and world dramatization.
Much has been said about Václav Havel since his death on December 18th, 2011. So much that it would be nearly impossible to avoid repeating the words of others. But still, he was and remains my hero – and for this reason I can’t manage to keep silent in the face of his passing. Therefore, I’d like to begin by sharing a personal memory.

It was 1998, and I was travelling around Central Asia. The train was slowly making its way through the endless Kazakh-steppe, hours upon hours. The car stunk and was overcrowded, and I felt that I was going to faint. A local man was sitting in front of me. It was obvious that he was able to bear the hardships of travel more stoically. As we began to talk he asked me about my country and our way of life. In the end, he wanted to know about the Czech president. I told him – with certain pride, I admit – that it was Václav Havel. It didn’t impress him as much as I expected or hoped. “Is he tall?”, he asked. This question sounded odd, even absurd. But I could read its fatal importance from his face when I answered, “No, he’s quite short.” The man looked sorry, but didn’t write me off completely. He tried again: “Is he healthy?” I had to disappoint him once more: “No, he’s ill, very ill, to be honest.” He looked even more sorry, but still made one last attempt: “How many children does he have?” When I revealed that Václav Havel was childless, he looked at me with compassion and even made a clumsy gesture, as if wanting to stroke my head.

Even though I completely understood this man’s logic, I couldn’t help but feel that my scale of values was slightly superior. Which is not to say that I’m interested in insulting Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Kazakh president who prides himself on his bull-like physique and fathering of many children. It only reminds me of why Václav Havel has always been dear to my heart. For me, he came from “elsewhere”. His presence embodied “other” principles and challenged the rules of natural selection. He was weak and powerless, but he won. And although he had no children, his heirs are scattered around the world.

I am probably a typical kid of the Velvet Revolution. I was sixteen at the time of the change, which meant that I was waking up and starting to look around just as the whole country was doing likewise. Václav Havel was the face and the voice of this awakening. The reality into which we woke was often hard to bear, but it was also becoming more and more normal – and normalcy is always bearable, by definition. But Havel’s presence gave hope that things can be different and that it is worthwhile to continually strive for more. As he once said, “Hope is not the belief that something is achievable, but the conviction that something makes sense regardless of whether it is achievable or not”.

In this respect, Václav Havel is the symbol of my youth, and of the things I would never renounce – even though I’m not sure whether they are still here. With his departure, the world has become a different place, and I’ll have to get used to it once again. Who knows, maybe I’ll finally grow up.

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NEW WAVES IN THE VISEGRAD FOUR: THE HISTORY OF AN ADVENTURE
The 1960s were decidedly the most successful years of European cinema. French New Wave (La Nouvelle Vague) was born in this period, and its aesthetics and topics – along with the critical acclaim that followed – prepared a path for a variety of new waves, not only in Europe (thinking for example of the Brazilian Cinema Novo).

As cinema eventually took its place among other fields of art, it became an emancipatory tool for moviemakers from The Other Europe, as Dina Iordanova puts it. This period also gave rise to important currents that included the Hungarian New Cinema, the Czechoslovak New Wave and the Yugoslavian Black Wave. Respective new waves occurred at different times in different countries or simply did not arrive, as some researchers claim about Polish cinema. National new waves used varying aesthetics, and it is impossible to reduce them to a single phenomenon. However, the term “new wave” has generally been attributed to the most original, prolific and creative periods of a given national cinema.

**Hungary: The Socialist New Wave**

The beginning of the 60s brought considerable freedom in Hungarian social life. The revolutionary leaders of 1956 were largely released from prison. The term “Goulash Communism” was coined to describe the years under János Kádár. In fact, Hungary was nicknamed “the merriest barrack in the Soviet camp”. When public discourse was moderately freed, there was finally a place for films that more or less directly addressed previously taboo topics. Indeed, it was political engagement that distinguished Hungarian cinema from 1963 to 1971. The theme of this work might be described as “man and history”. During this time, Miklós Jancsó explored relations of power and the role of individuals in his visually refined cinematic parabolas. His films can be interpreted as objections to the fatalistic concept of national destiny. In turn, Sándor Sára and Károly Makk made an attempt to settle the Stalinist period. Sára’s *The Thrown Up Stone* (Feldobott kő, 1968) addressed the subject of forced collectivization. The inhuman diagnosis of the film was strengthened through its portrayal of Romani people (so-called “Gypsies”), unaccustomed to settled life. Meanwhile, Makk’s *Love* (Szerelem, 1971) was a portrayal of two women: a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. Upon the arrest of her husband for political reasons, the younger woman hides the truth to protect the feelings of the older woman. Thanks to an agreement with the postman, she maintains the illusion of her husband’s escape to the West and his recognition overseas as an artist.

This new Hungarian cinema did not overlook the problems of youth, teenage angst – an emblematic topic both for La Nouvelle Vague and Czechoslovak New Wave. Among many titles working in this direction, it is worthwhile to mention Istvána Gaál’s *The Drift* (Sodrásban, 1964), owing much to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *The Adventure* (1960), and *The Girl* (Eltávozott nap, 1960) by Márta Mészáros.

Given the perspective of time, the most astonishing characteristic of the Hungarian New Wave – as well as Czechoslovak and Polish productions – is the willingness and capacity filmmakers displayed in citing the national cinemas of neighboring countries. An illustration of this tendency is Istvan Szabó’s short film *The Concert* (Koncert, 1963), conceptually an answer to Roman Polański’s *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (Dwaj ludzie z szafą, 1958). In the latter film, a series of unpleasant experiences eventually induces the two characters wandering with a wardrobe to return to the sea. Szabó adapted the fairy-tale language of Polański, but disagreed with the pessimistic outlook of the alumni of the National Film School in Łódź. Even if the two boys carrying a piano in the Hungarian film decided to leave their burden as well, others show up to take care of the instrument and tenderly protect it from the rain.
Another example of such a creative dialogue is the direct influence of Miloš Forman’s aesthetics and topics on the oeuvre of Gyula Gazdag, a distinguished director of feature films and documentaries. Gazdag admired Forman’s fearlessness and ability to represent socialist gloominess, backwardness and narrow-mindedness, particularly in Black Peter (Černý Petr, 1963). After watching it, he never missed a screening of a Czechoslovak film in Budapest. He paid tribute to his idol in the documentary Selection (Konkurs, 1964), which, in the style of Forman’s The Audition (Konkurs, 1964), tells the story of a musical audition. The crucial difference was that the Hungarian audition was real – the Union of Communist Youth had organized an audition for rock bands.

Lívia Gyarmathy also admitted to substantial influence from Czech filmmakers, especially Forman, Věra Chytilova and Jaromil Jireš. Certainly, Do You Know Sunday Morning? (Ismeri a szandi mandit?, 1968) could easily be mistaken for a film by Forman or Menzel, given its bittersweet take on the dilemmas of a teenage girl working in a factory during the summer. In interviews, she equally underscored another source of inspiration, Kazimierz Karabasz’s The Music Players (Muzykanci, 1960): “The film which tells nothing and yet everything”.

**Czechoslovakia: The Golden 60s**

In Czechoslovakia, the 60s was nicknamed “The Golden 60s” (Zlatá šedesátá). It was a period of political freedom, which resulted in an extraordinary boom in cultural life. The films of this period earned Czechoslovak cinema its perennial reputation among cinephiles. The ultimate confirmation of this were the Academy Awards awarded to two Czechoslovak filmmakers – Ján Kadár for The Shop on Main Street (Obchod na korze, 1965) and Jiří Menzel for Closely Watched Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky, 1966). A string of trophies went to Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, Vojtěch Jasny and Jan Němec at various international festivals. The end of the lucky streak of Czechoslovak cinema was the suppression of the Prague Spring with the period of so-called “normalization”, which excluded directors that failed to uphold or undermined classical principles of cinema.

The strength and originality of the Czech New Wave lay in its poetic diversity and bravery in setting new directions for cinema. It was a stylistic and thematic rupture with the past. The dogma of the Czech New Wave was a quest for the truth. This uppermost aim justified the presence of an extreme variety of means of expression: from those inspired by cinéma vérité and cinema d’auteur, to surrealism and the avant-garde. Undeniably, the films of the Czech New Wave were following in a direction previously opened by Jaroslav Hašek and Bohumil Hrabal. However, they were also testimonies to the relinquishing of Czech heroes, in a way which excused his smallness and conservatism.

The unique quality of the Czech New Wave was an outcome of distinctive bonds and mutual inspirations between literature and cinema. It was the product of direct cooperation between authors and filmmakers. The latter not only adapted literary works of their colleagues, but also engaged them as writers, consultants, dramatists and production managers. An example of such literary-cinematic teamwork was that of Bohumil Hrabal and Jiří Menzel, who started to work together in the 60s. Today, the Czech New Wave is still considered to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration – and not exclusively for Czech or Slovak cinema. It is also the most distinguished and thoroughly analyzed among Central European new waves.

**Slovak Fights over the New Wave**

For Slovaks, controversy about the existence of the Slovak New Wave has emerged from more general questions about the cultural tradition of the country. Thus, writing a history of the cinema after 1993 is simultaneously implicated in writing the independent history of Slovakia. Only today are the films created in the 60s receiving a cultural and contextual home. Cited in publications and re-released on DVD, they are becoming a central component of cultural heritage of this relatively young country. Obviously, it cannot be denied that Czech and Slovak cinema were very closely connected on organizational, technical and personal levels in the 60s. Censorship restrictions and the policy of film release were likewise shared. However, there are strong reasons for analyzing the Slovak New Wave as an independent artistic phenomenon. The works of Juraj Jakubisko, Elo Havetta, Dušan Hanák and Štefan Uher all stand out, with their strong carnivalesque in-
clinations making use of the grotesque and exaggeration. What is more, the dominant thematic framework of Slovak directors was the problem of national identification. Therefore, it is not surprising that the films of Slovak directors made in the 60s are regarded as the foundations for Slovak artistic cinema.

Critics regard 1962 as a start of the Slovak New Wave. It was the year when films by the so-called “big three” premiered: Peter Solan’s *The Boxer* (*Boxer a smrt*, 1963), Štefan Uher’s *The Sun in the Net* (*Slnk v sieti*, 1962) and Martin Holly’s *The Gawk Road* (*Havraňia cesta*, 1962).

Finally, Slovak cinema, often perceived as inferior to its Czech counterpart, has received much deserved recognition. The films of Peter Solan, Stanislav Barabáš, Otakar Krivánek, Martin Hollý, Ján Kadár, Eduard Grečner and young alumni of FAMU: Juraj Jakubisko, Elo Havetta, Dušan Hanák were the backbone of the Slovak cinema. The thematic and stylistic individuality of Slovak films has become increasingly visible, although this was already noticed in the mid-60s by critic Antonín J. Liehm and director Stanislav Barabáš.

It is beyond doubt that the Czech and Slovak New Waves were answers to the specific conditions of a socialist society. However, their liveliness was also fuelled by an expansion of global youth movements of the time. In particular,
the films of Slovak directors, such as Juraj Jakubisko or Elo Havetta, indicate the strong influences of counter-cultural ideas and practices. The adaptation of foreign vocabularies of resistance was supported by similar tendencies in local Czech and Slovak cultures, surrealist traditions included.

Poland: Quest for the New Wave

While a description of new waves in Czech, Slovak or Hungarian national cinemas does not give rise to major problems, the situation is complicated when it comes to Poland. In Polish cinema, the new wave, as it is understood by film historians, did not become a sharply defined current. Therefore, in the case of Polish cinema we can, at most, speak of “new-wavish” tendencies, impulses or attempts. Works applying aesthetics of the new wave includes the following: Krzysztof Zanussi’s *The Illumination* (*Illuminacja*, 1972), the early works of Jerzy Skolimowski – who, upon directing *Identification Marks: None* (*Rysopis*, 1964) and *Walkover* (*Walkower*, 1965), was anointed a leading representative of the new cinema in Central and Eastern Europe, along with Miloš Forman – and Andrzej Żuławski’s *On the Silver Globe* (*Na srebrnym globie*, 1976-1988).

In the face of a small number of Polish films that could be branded as the “Polish New Wave”, the strategy of applying this frame to Polish cinema consists in treating the Polish New Wave as an ahistorical phenomenon. Thanks to this approach, authors of the articles published in *The Polish New Wave. A History of a Nonexisting Phenomenon* (*Polska Nowa Fala. Historia fenomenu, którego nie było*) can place a variety of works under this heading: from Grzegorz Królikiewicz’s films from the 70s and Andrzej Kostenka and Witold Leszczyński’s *Rewizja osobista* (1972), alongside Piotr Ukläński’s *Summer Love* (2009).

Regardless of whether or not a Polish New Wave existed, it is worth examining the films from the 60s and 70s, for some of them were important testimonies to the absorption of impulses coming from other new waves. A meaningful example would be the work of Krzysztof Zanussi, who, besotted with the cinema of young Frenchmen, started his public activity interviewing debutants of the *La Nouvelle Vague* and reporting from film locations. This partially explains the Godard-esque film editing of *The Illumination* as well as the plot of *The Structure of Crystals* (*Struktura kryształu*, 1969), which echoes the structure of Claude Chabrol’s *The Handsome Serge* (*Le Beau Serge*, 1958). In the meantime, another important source of inspiration for Zanussi’s debut was *Intimate Lightning* (*Intimní osvětlení*, 1965) by Ivan Passer. The director claimed that his film was an answer to Passer’s work. A comparative perspective applied to both films shows numerous similarities, but also differences that are products of attempts to voice local contexts.
Summary

New wave films contributed to the renewal of film language. Loosening traditional narrative, introducing mental pictures, original film editing, and utilizing documentary inspiration all lead to the acknowledgment of national cinemas of the countries from Central and Eastern Europe by foreign critics. What is of foremost importance is that local new waves were precisely the starting point for identifying national cinemas and their appearance still marks the most prolific and original periods in the history of given national cinemas.

Fifty years on, a comparative look at national new waves from Czechoslovakia and Hungary showcases thematic and aesthetic differences. But it also exposes the uncanny affinity of national cinemas of the Visegrad Four. This similarity is revealed on two primary levels. The first one is a sphere of direct influences, references and inspirations – as was the case with the “dialogue” of Szabó and Polański, Zanussi and Passer, Gazdag and Forman. Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian filmmakers talked or disputed with one another via their films. The second level, on which we discover the proximity of the region’s cinema, is an indication of the original role played by new wave movies – they were indicators of social attitudes and impulses to discuss topics that went beyond film. Watching films was not simply the peculiar whim of cinephiles, but also a demonstration of an active involvement in public life. New wave films delivered material for thinking about history and the problems specific to countries dealing with communist oppression.

Translated by Anna Wójcik

The author is Polish and an Associate Professor at the Institute of Contemporary Culture, University of Łódź.

REFERENCES
IN CENTRAL EUROPE, THE NEW WAVE OF THE 1960S WAS AN ANSWER TO STABILIZATION, which let independent artists express their attitude toward the communist establishment and reality. Films made by New Wave directors were experimental (rejecting traditional narration), politically anti-establishment, and considered the human condition and psychological issues in relation to everyday life in communist countries. The main inspirations for these artists were the simplicity of ordinary life, French New Wave, and Italian Neorealism.

**France – La Nouvelle Vague**

The New Wave phenomenon was born in France in the 50s and 60s, largely among young filmmakers involved with the cinema magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* who were looking for a way to express post-war anxiety and to artistically show the reality of the human condition. Above all, it was influenced by Italian Neorealism and classical Hollywood cinema. At the center of their interests were human characters, and behavior on display in social, moral and political contexts.

**Czech Republic – FAMU**

Founded in 1946, the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague educated the main Czech and Slovak directors of New Wave in Czechoslovakia, alongside many others from Central Europe. As one of the oldest film schools in Europe, it managed to sustain itself even during the darkest moments of communism. After graduating, many students emigrated to America and contributed significantly to American film industry, including Miloš Forman.

**Main Directors and Films**

**Hungary**
- ISTVÁN SZABÓ *The Concert* 1963
- ISTVÁN GAÁL *The Drift* 1964
- MIKLÓS JANCSSÓ *The Round-Up* 1965
- SÁNDOR SÁRA *The Thrown Stone* 1968
- LÍVIA GYARMATHY *Do you know Sunday-Morning?* 1968
- GYULA GAZDAG *Selection* 1970
- KÁROLY MAKK *Love* 1971
- MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS *The Girl* 1960

**Czech**
- JÁN KADÁR *The Shop on Main Street* 1965
- JIŘÍ MENZEL *Closely Watched Trains* 1966
- VÉRA CHYTILOVÁ *Daisies* 1966
- VOJTÉCH JASNÝ *The Cassandra Cat* 1963

**Slovakia**
- PETER SOLAN *The Boxer* 1963
- ŠTEFAN UHER *The Sun in the Net* 1962
- MARTIN HOLLÝ *The Gawk Road* 1962
- JURAJ JAKUBISKO *Crucial Years or Christ's Years* 1967
- ELO HAVETTA *Slávnost v botanickej záhrade* 1969
- DUŠAN HANÁK *Pictures of the Old World* 1972

**Poland**
- KRZYSZTOF ZANUSSI *The Illumination* 1972
- JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI *Identification Marks: None* 1964
- ANDRZEJ KOSTENKA AND WITOLD LESZCZYŃSKI *Rewizja osobista* 1972
- PIOTR UKŁAŃSKI *Summer Love* 2009
- GRZEGORZ KRÓLIKIEWICZ *Through and Through* 1972
- KAZIMIERZ KARABASZ *The Music Players* 1960
Hungary

ISTVÁN SzABó
The Concert 1963

ISTVÁN GAÁL
The Drift 1964

MIKLóS JANCSó
The Round-Up 1965

SÁNDOR SÁRA
The Thrown Up Stone 1968

LíVIA GyARMATHy
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Selection 1970

KÁROLy MAKK
Love 1971

MÁRTA MéSzÁROS
The Girl 1960

Czech

JÁN KADÁR
The Shop on Main Street 1965

JIŘí MENzEL
Closely Watched Trains 1966

MILOš FORMAN
Black Peter 1963, Loves of a Blonde 1967

VěRA CHyTILOVÁ
Daisies 1966

VOJTěCH JASNý
The Cassandra Cat 1963

JAN NěMEC

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PETER SOLAN
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Slávnost v botanickej záhrade 1969

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Pictures of the Old World 1972

Poland

KRzySzTOF zANUSSI
The Illumination 1972

JERzy SKOLIMOWSKI
Identification Marks: None 1964

ANDRzEJ ŻUłAWSKI, MILOš FORMAN

ANDRzEJ KOSTENKA AND WITOLD LESzCzyńSK
Rewizja osobista 1972

PIOTR UKLAńSKI
Summer Love 2009

GRzEGORz KR óLIKIEWIC z
Through and Through 1972

KAzIMIERz KARABASz
The Music Players 1960

Jindřich Štreit
from the collection Chlévská ľyňka
What is an Artist-in-residence (AIR) Program?

Artist-in-residence programs are primarily intended to help artists and others involved in cultural activities (e.g. curators, event organizers, mediators, etc.) in the areas of visual arts, music, literature, theatre or dance in the development of projects. Such programs have become increasingly popular, with the cultural activists joining in the promotion of such efforts. In short, these programs are intended to provide creators with new cultural environments and inspiration, to help them establish networks and forms of cooperation, contemplate new projects and to prepare exchange programs.

The three most popular types of residency: Studio residency (3 to 12 months), Research residency (short-term), and Exchange residency (negotiable term of stay).

Who can apply?

Every AIR program has its own profile and criteria for selection. Most artist-in-residence programs hold an open call for applications. In most cases, an application form, portfolio, curriculum vitae (résumé) and planned project description must be submitted. Occasionally, a budget plan will be required. In the application form, it’s important to emphasize what will be accomplished during the residency period.

Where to apply?

One of the best-known artist-in-residence programs for artists and others involved in the visual arts in Central and Eastern Europe is the Visegrad Artist Residency Program (VARP). Founded in 2006, it focuses on the mobility of artists. Thanks to growing interest, the program was divided into three specific categories: general residency, performing arts residency, and residency in New York. This program is for citizens of the V4 countries. One artist per year is selected from each V4 country for residency in New York, several individual artists and groups of artists are selected within the other two VARP programs annually: International Visegrad Fund (www.visegradfund.org/residencies/)

In every V4 country, there is a cultural institution that leads an artists-in-residence program, both for foreign artists domestically and for national artists abroad.

In Poland, one of the leading AIR programs is the artists-in-residence lab-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Public Transportation</th>
<th>Transportation Cost</th>
<th>Food Cost</th>
<th>Cinema Ticket</th>
<th>Insurance Cost</th>
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<td>Warsaw</td>
<td>€80 dormitory, €450 double room flat, €380 single room flat, €135 single room</td>
<td>€25 3-month ticket</td>
<td>€25</td>
<td>€135</td>
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<td>€11</td>
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<td>Prague</td>
<td>€130 double room, dormitory, €470 single room flat, €550 double room flat, €275 single room</td>
<td>€28 3-month ticket</td>
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<td>€150</td>
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<td>Bratislava</td>
<td>€40 dormitory, €300 single room flat, €400 double room flat</td>
<td>€70 3-month ticket</td>
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<td>€150</td>
<td>€6</td>
<td>€10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budapest</td>
<td>€100 dormitory, €130 single room, €195 single room flat, €295 double room flat</td>
<td>€35 3-month ticket</td>
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<td>€3.55</td>
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</table>

**STUDYING IN ONE OF THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES? GET TO KNOW RELATED COSTS AND PACK YOUR BAGS.**

What does an AIR program provide?

In most cases, the institution that leads the AIR program supplies the participant with a studio, an exhibition space, a coordinator and promotion. There are various programs focused on specific fields of art, and various possibilities for financial support. The support of travel, accommodation and living costs are flexible, depending on the grant.

The main AIR program in Slovakia is sponsored by the SPACE gallery, with its SPACE residential program. Residency lab is the first residency program for artists encouraging international exchange in Bratislava. Just as other institutions leading artists-in-residence programs, SPACE has a studio for foreign artists and supports Slovak artists in residency programs abroad.

ACAX Agency For Contemporary Art Exchange leads the most successful artist-in-residence program in Hungary. ACAX arranges the professional and practical co-ordination of public grants and awards, and financially supports the participation of successful applicants, or helps the applicants to raise the necessary funds for participation in a residency program.

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The author is Polish artistic producer of Alternativa Festival.

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**Opportunities and Announcements**

[Image -1x317 to 213x681]

These photos are from two VARP projects by István Csákány, a Hungarian artist. István Csákány: Monument for Monument (VARP 2007 at Truc Sphérique/Stanica, Žilina) and István Csákány: It Was an Experience to Be Here (VARP 2009 at Meet Factory, Prague), photo by Dušan Dobiaš.
t is difficult to say what arouses my interest, what it is that draws me into his world, which is so very familiar: devoid of gadgets, sensationalism, or indeed anything unusual, aside from his seldom-appearing capacity to speak about reality with such intimacy and simplicity.

Streit has always photographed the countryside: his native northern Moravia, as it is called. The countryside is where he began work as a teacher and photographer at the end of the sixties, and where he was arrested in 1982 and given a ten-month suspended sentence for insulting the republic and political dignitaries. You know, for taking pictures of things as they were, rather than of socialism as it ought to be.

He was barred from practising his vocation in his hometown of Sviniec. But now, even as he gains worldwide renown, Streit’s subject remains, as it was in that town, “man” – that vaguely destitute vessel of sanctity and grace. Not the tenant, not the tax-paying and voting citizen, nor the ethnic face – simply the person. If a documentary photographer can be apolitical, then this is Streit. Or maybe he is pre or post-political and this is precisely what is insufferable, what an authoritarian regime cannot swallow: that he moves in a different time, a different set of coordinates, but he photographs the same – the same reality of the eternally marginal, resistant to change by directive or campaign assembly. Resistant to development and being developed. To put it another way, people change less than systems – happiness, fragility and sorrow are no more regime-dependent than conceit, greed and the endless appetite for power.

Only this afternoon, I myself discovered which twenty-five photos taken in the Kiskunság region, of the fifty on exhibit in Budapest for two years, were selected for this show in Pécs. I thought of asking for the precise list when I started writing up this brief introduction, but then I thought, what’s the point?

In each of Jindřich Štreit’s photographs, his whole life’s oeuvre, so to speak, is present
Because twenty-five or fifty or a hundred of Streit’s pictures in any arrangement, anywhere, will still produce a complete, round and lovable world. And no matter what they speak about, or what their theme is, they will always say the same thing. And if I were able to call this “same thing” by its name, or to give it a name, I could finish this introductory talk right now. But I can’t. Maybe this “same thing” does not have one name, and maybe even Streit wouldn’t be able to define it. Maybe he himself is trying to circumscribe it again and again through his pictures. To circum-view it? To circum…see it? I admit this seems easier to me than talking about it, and perhaps that is the advantage photography has over writing.

This certainly has something to do with “man”, with fragility and dignity, with hope and hopelessness, with the sublime and the vulgar, and with the fact that harmony does not consist of a peaceful procession of disparate elements, but a balance of — sometimes glaring, sometimes bloody, sometimes hopeless — contradictions. His work also concerns irony and love—which Miklós Mészöly calls “merciless understanding”, a highly appropriate definition in our case. And serenity, yes, serenity, which is not cheerfulness, nor even the absence of sadness, but only some kind of delicate insight that it is better to live than not, and although this is close to indifference, the insight that we do what we do. Without comment, but doing it all the same, whether it’s chopping trees, burying the dead, spaying horses or plucking chickens.

The pictures here were taken between 1996 and 1999. They show an infant and an artificial bride, a thoroughly unlikely sight behind the iron grill of a shop window cut into the side of an adobe house. And a cart, a horse, a shadow, well-boots, a sheep, a goat, a grain truck, printed house-coats in all sizes and patterns, a beret, a petrol-lamp, a trenchcoat, a torn plastic bag, a pan, a slice of bread, welfare-state glasses, frozen cobblestones, a denim suit, a Sokol radio, a tin plate, a Coke advertisement and a Junoszy television, Vietnamese slippers and a piece of wax cloth, a Mickey-mouse T-shirt and a rail-
way employee’s cap, the wreck of a Wartburg and a “twist” pullover for pig slaughter day, to list only the accessories, the objects without which “man” is lost, and which are, let’s face it, fairly uniform in this backyard called Central and Eastern Europe.

Although I am aware that this is the Kiskunság, here in Hungary, I keep feeling that we’d see something quite similar if this was Streit’s Moravian, Austria, or even a French countryside collection. We would still see, somewhat differently dressed and obviously living quite differently, the same little man, never victorious but invincible all the same. Streit shares the artistic mother tongue with Hasek, Hrabal and Menzel. Through his own special Czech windows, those special and durable glasses, he is able to see and make us see the world as a mixture of the ridiculous and tragic, vulgar and sublime, with – let’s not resist the pleasure of catachresis – the sure touch of the blind. “I always start out from surrealism, a kind of absurd view of life, from the relationship between two completely incongruous objects. I’m fascinated when the animal, the natural and the instinctive coincide to create something very beautiful, gentle and love-worthy” – is how he put it ten years ago in the film portrait Between Light and Darkness.

No matter where he works, he cannot focus with another lens, on a different scale, than that of his own village. In various regions of the world, he tracks down the figures and types of the small community in which he lives: to cite the title of an earlier collection – “The Village is a Whole World”, which it already was, even when the world was not yet one big satellite-linked village. All the same, suburbs, resorts and towns are also rounded, perfect worlds just as a face or a hand is not incomplete—when viewed as an entirety. Streit shows universality on a very different level, in the human face. In that, we are all similarly different. And for that matter, differently alike.

All these equivalencies make me think of Iván Mándy, whom I consider to be a great writer of the people (since the
people are neither the country-folk nor the bourgeoisie), just as I consider Streit to be a photographer of the people. With Mándy too, whether you line up five, ten or fifty short stories they always end up radiating the same passionate indifference, or indifferent ardour, that is Mándy’s. In the way his heroes look out of the picture with his own eyes and he, Mándy, through the eyes of his heroes. It’s this kind of look I see in the eyes of Streit and his heroes. Humanity devoid of illusions, I would say, if it were not more advisable to circumscribe such a pompous and worn-out notion.

It is impossible to know how I would react to these pictures if I did not know they were taken by a Czech. Aware that they are not the work of a Hungarian artist, would I still think they are more serene, more airy, not as dark, or not in the same way, as those of our socio-photographers? Maybe the difference would appear, maybe not. But knowing what I know, I cannot refrain from rounding it off, from noticing how these people smile in their poverty, in their life in the margin of existence – of course, it’s not “the culture of smiles”. But there it is, in the corner of their mouths, or maybe not even there, but rather in the depths of the picture, the tones, the lighting, somewhere between light and darkness, a confidence both malicious and shy.

Still, with or without reason, the sun is shining, the petrol-lamp is burning, and so is the light bulb. Grass grows, and later it will dry out. We live out the life of “man”, and “man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” Maybe this is what these pictures are good for: looking at them we are ready to believe in Hemingway’s forgotten old man. /

Translated by Kinga Dornacher and Stephen Humphreys

The author is a Hungarian poet, writer and playwright