

1989 -2019: Thirty Years After: Re-Enchanting Europe?

Ferenc Miszlivetz

Abstract This paper focuses on the complexities created by the interlinked and complex processes of Central-European transitions that arose as the result of integration into the EU and the undermining influence of turbo-capitalism. During the decades before and after the Annus Mirabilis, 'Europe' and European integration were the models for peaceful regional integration worldwide. Due to the lack of a common vision for the future in "old" and "new" Europe, and due to unexpected internal and external challenges, and increased global uncertainties, the European dream gave way to a common European frustration. Evaluating the transformations of the past three decades, the question remains whether Europe can avoid further disintegration and gain back its role as a model for regional cooperation. Could this provide a window of opportunity for a more important role for Central Europe?

Keywords: solidarity; Central European co-operation; integration; common European home; nation-state paradigm; European civil society; uncertainty; transformation.

JEL Classification: R58.

The Stirling Villa, the New Detente and European Civil Society

What happened during the past three decades and why needs careful consideration, scholarly research, detailed analysis and a balanced debate. Especially if we are to continue the disrupted process of European construction, we need to try to re-enchant Europe again. One cannot fall in love with a cold project such as the single market, as Ralf Dahrendorf warned us long ago. Understanding the causes for the failure might help us to identify new methods and hopefully a new design and clearer purpose for our joint enterprise. We cannot be sure this will happen, but if we fail to try, we will never find out. One thing is for sure, the European construction will not and cannot continue in the same old way.

Ferenc Miszlivetz (✉)*

*Professor. Dr., Director, iASK - Institute of Advanced Studies, Kőszeg, Hungary.

E-mail: agnes.kovari@iask.hu



Photo taken in November 1987 from the author's private collection. See here, center, is the author, Ferenc Miszlivetz; in the foreground to the right is Viktor Orbán.

A photo from November 1987 shows a small group of young people looking into the camera – into their future – with optimism and confidence. They stand before the Stirling Villa in Velem, a tiny settlement in Western Hungary between Kőszeg and Szombathely, right at the Austrian border (then still the Iron Curtain). The photo shows the participants of one of the “Velem weekends” – a series of meetings for college students and intellectuals in the democratic opposition to discuss issues outside the university curriculum of late socialism.¹ The topics discussed were, for example, anti-semitism in East and Central Europe, the '56 revolution in Hungary, the 1968 Prague Spring and the following Warsaw Pact clamp down, the birth of Charta '77, the Polish Solidarnosc movement or the new European Peace Movement and the Network East-West Dialogue. The meetings were initiated by a small group of activists who believed in self-organizing societies and envisaged the future of European democracy based upon horizontal cross border cooperation.

The personal trajectories of the group are telling: the young lady on the left was the main organizer of the autonomous student self-government (*szakkollégium*) and a chief librarian at the Szombathely Teachers Training College. The young man on the right was a member of the István Bibó student college who soon became a Fidesz (The Party of Young Democrats established in March 1988) activist, and later the head of the Fidesz election campaign. Today he is the Hungarian Ambassador to Austria. Behind him to the right stands the general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Youth Organization (KISZ), which tried hard to transform itself into a democratic youth organization. Next to him is a young member of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party,

¹ The university curricula in the social sciences at this time did not allow for discussions of important contemporary literature related to the pressing social and political issues of the time.

later Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), and a member of the new democratically elected parliament. Next to him is a student from Szombathely, today the President of the County Vas regional government (Fidesz). In front and in the middle stands a young man with short hair and a moustach who was then an informal leader of the István Bibó student self-government. Today, and for the last 10 years, he has been the Prime Minister of Hungary.

At the time this picture was taken, they all had good reasons to be optimistic: the students' movement was gaining momentum; the reform wing of the disintegrating Socialist Workers' Party was trying very hard to organize so-called reform circles throughout the country, entering into dialogue with the local communities about the future of Hungary; the Communist Youth Organization, hoping to survive, stood for openness and metamorphosis, so it became a forerunner of democratic reforms; students were engaged in various mushrooming grassroots movements. Everyone seen in the photo knew that change was inevitable and that they would play a role in them. There were still, however, uncertainties. The meeting in Velem was about establishing a nationwide network for the democratic student movement (*Szakkolégiumok Országos Hálózata*). The organizers invited Imre Pozsgay, the most reform-minded member of the Central Committee of the still ruling communist party. Pozsgay's attendance was prohibited by Károly Grósz, the hardliner party secretary. The rumour was spread that Grósz even intended to clamp down on the students' self-organizations. Instead, Imre Nagy, a young and innocent looking KISZ chieftain, was sent to Velem to assure the audience about the best and most democratic intentions of his organization and their readiness for negotiations with grassroots movements and civil initiatives.

The student leaders in the photo were preparing for their first international meeting, co-organized by the European Network for East-West Dialogue, just a few days later in November. The conference, entitled "New Detente", echoed Gorbachev's message heralding a new epoch, but the conference was prohibited by the university authorities. It was held anyway in a music school in the middle of Budapest. The presence of Western journalists from important news agencies, Reuters, UPI and AFP, restricted the authorities from interfering. Bibó College students allowed each organization to delegate two participants so it happened that leading figures of the democratic opposition, like György Konrád and Miklós Haraszti, sat next to the delegates of the communist party (MSzMP), the fellow traveller People's Patriotic Front and the official, heavily controlled Hungarian Peace Council.

The young, unknown student, in the middle of the sunny picture, practiced his self-written speech several times in English. This short but peppery speech brought Viktor Orbán into the focus of the international public. The more senior and rather cumbersome urban activists of the democratic opposition began to be overshadowed by a younger generation coming mostly from the countryside.²

Western participants, like Cornelius Castoriadis, Federigo Argentieri, Mary Kaldor,

² My role was to facilitate the bringing together of Western peace and human rights activists and grassroots Hungarian student circles. It was a unique opportunity to create a network of networks, thereby enhancing the social and political impact from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

the anti-Vietnam war hero Jim Skelly, and leaders of the European peace movements, conscientious objecters, and former members of the European Parliament like Dieter Esche, were enchanted by the fresh energies and organizational capacities of their hosts. University authorities withdrew their prohibition of the event the day before the New Detente conference began and offered to host the meeting at the beautiful banquet hall of ELTE University. Their offer was refused but they were kindly invited to participate.

The house in the photo behind the group of young people, the Stirling Villa in Velem, stands untouched today. Mr Stirling³ built the villa for his daughter before WWII. The Hungarian Arrow-cross (nazi) government, escaping towards Germany, held their last official meeting there on December 24th, 1944. The Holy Crown of the Hungarian kings was taken and hidden by them in a bunker of the villa's garden. The Stirling Villa was nationalized after the war and until recently used as the Vas County Cultural Center, one of the surviving post-communist institutions. Recently, it has been retaken by the municipality of Velem and is awaiting renovation. It is also waiting to tell its stories. An exhibition of the unpublished documents and photos of the Szombathely students' self-government, the László Németh College, together with the transcripts of the lectures given during the Velem weekends between 1986 – 1989 is planned there after the reconstruction of the villa⁴.

Three Decades Later: Which Way to Go?

The young people in the photo, did not enjoy the enchantment of Europe for too long. The sparkling moments and euphoria, stemming from a blossoming and promising European civil society, such as the East-West Dialogue networks, disappeared soon after unilateral and unconditional German unification, the resignation of Gorbachev and the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia. The end of the Cold War, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from former satellite countries and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not the beginning of a linear process and a long march for the actualization of European civil society. The promising process of social democratization from below was halted, and the achievements and innovations of the '80's were declared inconsequential by the new political elite (Miszlivetz 1999).

In contrast to today, thirty years after, the atmosphere is full of anxiety, uncertainty and unfulfilled promises. With Brexit at its Western edge, Russian troops occupying part of Ukraine and building up new military capacities at the Eastern edge, and with the frustrated group of EU candidates and would-be candidates at the Southern flank of former Yugoslavia, we live in a fragmented and uncertain continent amidst the coordinates of an old-new East-West and North-South cleavage. Unable to find

³ Emil Stirling (1879-1951): lawyer, member of the Knights Hospitaller. Mr. Stirling was born in 1879. In 1932 he bought and rebuilt the Herczeg Hotel (later Palace Hotel) in Szombathely. Between 1938-1944 he had built the Stirling-villa in Velem. He organised many social events that aroused the interest of the authorities. For his monarchist (legitimist) aspirations he was interned in 1944 to Sopronkőhida. The arrow-cross Szálasi government took over the Stirling villa in 1944. Stirling died in Szombathely in 1951.

⁴ Reconstruction of the villa is forecasted to be accomplished by the Fall of 2020. The re-opening of the building will start with the planned exhibition.

adequate and convincing answers to megatrends and the global and intertwined challenges of climate change, migration and the crumbling of the neoliberal world order, Europe as a dream is fading away for those who longed for it before and shortly after 1989 (Outhwaite 2013; Laqueur 2011; Holland 2015; Zielonka 2018; Misztal 1993).

What went Wrong?

1989 (and the social, economic and political transformation that followed) was a real turning point: it changed fundamentally the scope, size and scale of what European integration had been, and its significance extended far beyond Europe. The messages, as well as the impacts of the fermenting years, transgressed Europe's boundaries and heralded a new way of thinking about democracy, cross border solidarity and the capacity of suppressed societies to find peaceful ways to self-organize and confront conflicts non-violently vis a vis their oppressors. Indeed, a new praxis of cross border social networking was born during the '80s. It was the victory of dialogue, compromise, and consensus building.

Still, 1989 was a surprize for the vast majority of status quo believers, especially within the circles of mainstream American Kremlinologists, the builders of the Cold War institutions, including the European Union and, not surprisingly, among hardliner communist leaders within the Soviet bloc countries (Gaddis 1987, 1997). Against some of the interpretations, it was a sort of peaceful revolution in moral and intellectual terms. It was a paradigm shift.

The grassroot movements within the Soviet bloc countries, and also between East and West, created a new language of cooperation and civil society across frontiers. To a large extent, thanks to East-West networking, the vision of and the aspiration for a European civil society was born. This was partly a victory for grassroot social self-organizations, the so-called "movements from below", and solidarity, networking and non-violence were the buzzwords and *de facto* main characteristics of the new movements from below. The vision of nonviolent change of authoritarian regimes were reflections and results of a long learning process in East and Central Europe during the Iron Curtain era that culminated in the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 as a result, a new spirit of democracy and democratization and horizontal civil society cooperation sprang up in Europe.

The major state actors and their international guardian institutions, however, were not prepared for this unexpected turn, and had neither common visions nor agreed upon methods, plans or timetables for the change of the status quo; and European society at large did not engage in debates about a common future. After the first enchanting moments and mirage of sudden and peaceful change, came a quick and bitter awakening.

Western powers, led by the US, declared victory in the Cold War over the Soviet Union (the Empire of Evil as coined by Ronald Reagan). The economically and institutionally well-established neoliberal world order, with its carefully maintained, fragmented political system of nation states as its exclusive playground for democracy,

pushed back and discredited the alternative conceptions of the '80s. Unfounded expectations, wishful thinking, national egotism and the conviction about the "historical justice" of returning to Europe dominated the thinking of the East and Central European political elites.

From 1990 on, horizontal networking, solidarity, civil society, autonomy and self-governance were quickly replaced by the institutionalized formal, procedural democracy confined by the territorial boundaries of the nation state. The emerging new civil society paradigm was rapidly pushed back and condemned as illusionary, useless and even dangerous by the masters and the mainstream media of the neo-liberal world (e.g., Reagan, Thatcher), as well as global guardian institutions like the World Bank and IMF (Lomax 1995; Jensen and Miszlivetz 2006).

In other words, the old paradigm regained its dominance in the new post-Cold War era, and uncontrollable uncertainties and unpredictable change emerged with the deconstruction of the Iron Curtain. Anxiety, fear and exclusion started to overcome old democracies with a long-time experience in a well-protected "nested" integration. The miraculous spirit of the Velvet Revolutions was gone with the Euro-Atlantic wind, as if it had never existed. With its institutionalized amnesia, the EU did a perfect job to re-settlement the old paradigm. As Lampedusa wrote: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." (Lampedusa 1960).

The Post-Cold War European Integration Period

The Post-Cold War European Integration Period pointed towards the reduction of the complex process of integration to "project" dimensions and the one-sided imposition of unclear "conditionalities" from above. Arrogance, ignorance and indifference from Old Europe vis a vis newcomers called "New Europe" ("you have to learn first what democracy and market economy are") dominated the scene. Against all of the claims and promises, the neglect of "culture" (education, research, higher education, languages, differing values and aspirations, etc.), led to the strengthening of negative attitudes about non-co-operation, mistrust and the lack of the consciousness of common responsibility for a common European future.

At the end of the first decade of initial enthusiasm a frustrated, ignorant, and at best indifferent Western European public⁵, was supposed to integrate with societies that were just escaping from the traumas of a Soviet-type totalitarianism, driven partly by unrealistic expectations, partly by self-paralyzing scepticism and inferiority complexes. After the short moments of "Mirage", Eastern and Western European societies continued living in parallel realities. Although state borders were fading away step-by-step, the psychological and mental distances remained intact.

Meanwhile, the majority of societies of "Central Europe" were generally convinced they "belong to Europe" without any clear definition of what this "belonging" meant. They were concerned about their material wellbeing but had little to no knowledge and interest about the rapidly changing nature of global capitalism, its general social

⁵ For example, the double "no" vote in 2005 (one year after Eastern enlargement) reflects a different attitude of the Western European public regarding further integration.

impact and of actual paradoxes of European institutions and integration. They did not go through the process of “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*,”⁶ in other words, their participation in double dictatorships remained unreflected, and their elites partly entered European construction with the glory of martyrdom (as victims of suppressive regimes), and partly with the aspiration of quick and easy enrichment.

Without structured and institutionalized dialogue, or the elaboration of a common European historiography, proper educational and research institutions, and an interactive and socially and culturally sensitive and informed European Media, and the absence of a well-prepared political class and dedicated experts and professionals to play the role of intermediation, European Union slogans such as *unity in diversity*, or an *ever closer union* remained promising and attractive for EU candidates but less and less convincing to the wider European public. As a consequence, first extreme left- then right-wing nationalist/populist movements emerged in Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Western Europe. The European re-construction was doomed to continue from the two different parts (East and West) of Europe, each pursuing different goals and aspirations, implementing different and not negotiated methods (superimposed by one side) with predictably different sets of skills and institutional backgrounds. No wonder it went wrong soon.

Consequently, the process of European constitutionalization failed (2005), and the “permissive consensus” about a continuous integration was gone. The attempt at correction (period of consultation and contemplation) did not bring serious results even if José Manuel Barroso and Margot Walström met with members of parliaments and civil society groups in the member states of the European Union. Their presence was especially highlighted in the “New Europe” of the “post-communist”, so-called “new member states”. Soon thereafter the global economic and financial crisis of 2008 seriously hit the EU, resulting in more fragmentation, disintegration and alienation than solidarity and integration. As a result, the East-West division further deepened and has been extended with a North-South division and with the re-emergence of nationalist stereotypes (GREXIT, PIGS). Paradoxically, the nation state paradigm became the “winner” of the turbulent and unpredictable processes of the East-Central European transitions, intertwined with the global crises and the inadequate answers of the transnational institutions of the European Union (Habermas 2013).

At the same time, the shadow of Germany as a mighty old/new hegemon darkened the horizon of deepening the process of integration. Societies became more divided internally as well; a so-called right-wing populist upheaval evolved in Hungary and soon after in Poland between 2009-2011. Public discontent, vis a vis elite driven integration coupled and strengthened by neo-liberal doctrines and international guardian institutions, increased and became more widespread in the East and West. Right-wing extremist and radical nationalist movements infiltrated mainstream politics, some of them becoming political parties from 2010 on. Ever since racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, etc. are on the rise in varying degrees in the so-called stable,

⁶ There were varied attempts by some countries in transition (e.g., Czech Republic, Poland) to instigate some kind of lustration, with uncertain results.

“consolidated” democracies (REDs, Philipp C. Schmitter 2011) such as Germany, France, Great Britain. The game of scapegoating became widespread and permanent all over Europe, deepening further the epistemological crisis of Europe (Jensen and Miszlivetz, 2015).

After the European Dream – a European Nightmare?

The rather self-congratulatory or naive discourse (about the historic success of East-Central European transitions, and the dynamizing effects of crisis for integration) in the first decade of the new Millennium quickly disappeared without much self-reflection or follow-up debate. The new discourse, after the inefficient EU management of the multiple intertwining crises, shifted in the opposite direction. EU experts and pundits (Leonard 2005; Rifkin 2004; Schwimmer 2004⁷), including social science institutions and think tanks, did not offer sufficient explanations for this sharp turnaround. The incapability to deal with growing complexities created by unexpected, sharp and rapid change might be a root cause as well as the common denominator of this failure.

The turmoil of the post-Cold War European integration, commonly known as “Eastern or Big Bang enlargement” reached its peak with the 2015-2017 refugee crisis which has revealed crystal clearly all of the above weaknesses in an aggregated and irreversible form. Something fundamentally changed in Europe: the post-2015 EU does not remind us in any sense of the EU around the time of the Big Bang enlargement. The crises put into sharp focus all of the weaknesses and disabilities of the EU polity or the “European Polis” (Schmitter, 2018). This includes uncertain decision making, indecisive professional leadership, the application of double standards and lack of common purpose.

The revolt of the abandoned – the neglected, marginalized half of Europe, an equivalent of the American “deplorables” – raised their voices at the transnational level, and dynamized the rather lame and empty European political space. From Poland via Hungary, through France and Germany, and Brexiting Great Britain, they were and still are condescendingly called anti-democratic and populist. The irony of history, which was supposed to have ended according to the American academic guru Fukuyama and his followers, revealed similar changes of the political-social landscape and public discourse in the United States with the unexpected victory and popularity of the super-magnate-reality show man tycoon Donald Trump. The deep divisions in Western societies has obviously deeper historic causes that may be found in the general exhaustion of Western civilization – a large topic discussed throughout of 20th century by philosophers and historians. (Hankiss 2018).

A New European Paradox

Another new European paradox is the contribution of nationalist Euro-skeptical movements and parties that have galvanized European politics and a new European discourse.

⁷ Walter Schwimmer was the General Secretary of the Council of Europe from September 1999 until August 2004.

1) After Failure – a New Beginning?

If we are looking for useful and practical answers to this rather rhetoric question, three consecutive terrains of complex problems need to be addressed:

- what exactly happened in the past three and a half decades?
- why did things happen the way they did (Qui prodest?)
- is there any rational base for pursuing further integration and trying to construct the EU (and 'Europe' in general)?

In short: is (are) there a way(s) out from the present deadlock and turmoil, and if so where to go? Only after finding acceptable answers to these difficult and interconnected questions, can we move together towards a package of actions and measures (like reforms and policy recommendations), and start deliberations about new rules for a new game. In this short paper only an analytic outline of the past and some fragmented suggestions for future action can be offered.

2) The Lost Chance

In the European-global context, it is often mentioned that the EU (formerly EC) seemingly lost a great historic opportunity provided by the *Annus Mirabilis* and the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the bipolar logic of the post-Yalta world order. According the experiences of the past 30 years, one can argue that the EC/EU as a larger community and set of institutions, dependent on NATO and under US tutelage, was not prepared for a new global role in 1989. The quick utilization of the new opportunities was exploited at the nation state/member state level, when Germany unilaterally pushed through the first Eastern enlargement without any conditionality in 1991 and united with the former GDR in the name of *einiges Vaterland*. Although not recognized, in a sense this was a clear signal for the comeback of the nation state paradigm vis a vis the Common European Home, with its opposite logic to the idea of deeper integration which was an official slogan of the EU. This could be called the first (probably main) paradox of the EU.

3) The Peace Project as the Basis for Legitimacy of European Integration

European integration as a peace project received a blow with the outbreak of the civil war in former Yugoslavia, a longstanding candidate for EC membership. The acceptance of the claim for Slovenian and Croatian independence, first by Germany as the leading European power, followed by others, clearly heralded the beginning of a new epoch of national rivalry and further fragmentation without stronger integration into the European Community.⁸ An undiscussed alternative could have been the rapid acceptance of Yugoslavia into the European Community as a condition for peaceful secession within consolidated and regulated conditions.⁹ Since the war was forecasted

⁸ A pedantic distinction between "Europe" and the EU especially in case of long-term neighbouring candidate countries is not only a sad product of spiritless bureaucratic narrowmindedness, but an organic part of permanent and structured self-deceit.

⁹ On 8 June 1988, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Budimir Lončar, told to members of the

long before, the EC/EU lost the chance to extend its soft power capabilities towards its immediate neighbourhood. Instead, it watched helplessly as the almost decade-long bloodshed and endless traumas were inflicted on a region of former compatriots.

Helplessness, the lack of proper leadership and political willpower were again revealed in the case of the Euro-Maidan revolution and the following Russian invasion of the Crimea and continuing conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine. In both cases, any effective and prompt response (in many ways questioned and questionable) came only from the US (sometimes in naked forms, sometimes covered by NATO) with military intervention and economic sanctions. The EU condemned the Russian invasion and later joined the sanctions, while keeping an eye on its financial and economic interests (e.g., Schröder and other European leaders in Gazprom).

In the case of (self)destroyed Yugoslavia, the EU left its candidate and would be candidates struggling alone, with promises of accession tied to severe conditionality and threatening its new member states (“New Europe”) with financial and other sanctions if they did not follow the orders from Brussels institutions. No clear vision for the longer-term development of South-Eastern Europe, including the clear responsibility of the EU, was provided. Ineffective and often corrupt structures of monitoring and endless reporting failed to provide viable options for local societies. The recent case of Northern Macedonia and the self-contradicting reactions from the decisive powers of the EU such as Germany and France is a clear example.

4) Ignorance, Arrogance and Institutionalized Amnesia

During the Cold War years up until 1989/1991, European communities and societies had little to nothing to do with their Eastern neighbours: neither mutual, nor one-sided obligations, or responsibilities needed to be taken since the border was hermetically sealed and secured by the Russian/Soviet Army (then called the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact) and a system of increasingly sophisticated technical separation that was called the Iron Curtain. As a result, East and Central European countries (then the Soviet satellites, today’s New Europe) only reached the public stage in cases of protests, strikes, revolts, upheavals and revolutions, and later by the successful propaganda of Hungarian Gulash Communism, a proof for the ideology of “peaceful co-existence”. As a consequence the Velvet Revolutions, and especially their

collective Presidency of Yugoslavia that there are significant integration processes going on in Europe like the single market which require adaptation from Yugoslavia. In late 1989, Yugoslavia initiated the signing of the association agreement. At that time close to 70% of Yugoslav foreign trade was done with EEC countries. French politician Claude Cheysson, a member of the Delors Commission responsible for Mediterranean policy and North-South relations, was the strongest advocate of Yugoslav integration with Gianni De Michelis and German foreign minister Hans Dietrich Genscher not being opposed to the idea. Genscher was of the opinion that Yugoslavia might additionally strengthen EEC credibility among the non-NATO member countries, yet official negotiations did not start at that time. In May 1991, EEC President Jacques Delors and Luxembourg Prime Minister Jacques Santer offered to sign an association agreement and an agreement on 4.5 billion dollars support for structural reforms. Members of the EEC were divided over the importance they should give to the controversial principles of self-determination and territorial integrity. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl strongly emphasised the right to self-determination. On 25 November 1991 all agreements on co-operation between the EEC and Yugoslavia were cancelled.

consequences, came as a great and somewhat annoying surprise to Western societies and their political class. The first reactions were fuelled by ignorance, fear and anxiety, followed by arrogance vis a vis the poor and underdeveloped neighbours. Impotence and the political paralysis of the EU followed as a natural result.

5) The Burden We Carried: Cold War History from an East-Central European Civil Perspective

The aspirations and concerns of post-communist societies have not been adequately taken into account or addressed by local, national and supranational authorities and their guardian institutions. Its contributions to European democracy and solidarity was not considered a valuable asset and building block for a future European identity. The events of 1989 would not have been possible without the uprisings of East Berlin (1953) Hungary (1956), the Prague Spring (1968), followed by the successful movements of Charta '77 and the decade long peaceful activity of Polish Solidarnosc and the endless struggles and aspirations for freedom and a dignified life. But these events are still not integral to so-called European identity. These great, heroic, pro-European events, based upon historically developed values and aspirations, are only part of the "Institutionalized European Amnesia". Paradoxically and ironically, when East and Central European societies were revolting against the superimposed Soviet rule and dictatorship, they were acting on the basis of European values (the rule of law, human rights, liberal democracy and social solidarity). Most of them believed that besides their personal or national cause they were also fighting, and in many cases ready to die for, Europe as an idea, an aspiration, a set of values and a civilization (Kundera 1984).

6) Western Triumphalism instead of a Common European Home

By the time the decades-long struggle of East-Central European societies positively and peacefully concluded, they failed to recognise that their European ideal no longer existed, and the vision of a common European home was further away than ever before. Against the promise of Western leaders to Michail Gorbachev about building a peaceful world in cooperation – first of all a Common European Home – a cheap Hollywood version of triumphalism began to dominate the media as well as public and academic discourse. This self-congratulatory, dangerously simplified and misleading interpretation was embodied and amplified in and by the catchphrase "the end of history" (even if Fukuyama elaborated his thesis in a more nuanced way). The clear but false message was that liberalism, a sort of "liberal revolution" (Dahrendorf, 1990) had won, thanks again to the triumphant West, lead by the United States. Ignorance and arrogance hand-in-hand pushed the region of East and Central Europe back to the status of semi-periphery. No wonder a majority of East Central European societies feel that nothing much has changed (as a popular joke says: socialism was nothing more than a long and painful voyage from capitalism to capitalism).¹⁰

¹⁰ See also: Pew Research Centre. European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades->

Another, perhaps even more severe and less curable result of Western triumphalism was the alienation of post-Soviet Russia. The unfair mistreatment of Gorbachev by Western leaders, after his unilateral withdrawal of nuclear warheads and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from former satellite countries by the end of 1991, caused a strong resentment in Russian public opinion which became the hotbed for a more aggressive claim for restoring the country's lost superpower prestige and global influence. This culminated in the dismissal of Gorbachev as a traitor to Russian interests, according to many, in a new wave of Russian rearmament and infiltration, as well as other forms and acts of Putinism.

The most recent tensions between the US and the EU about security issues and the role of NATO might provide a chance to reformulate European security and neighbourhood policies and return to the negotiation tables instead of ineffective sanctions and moral conedemnations reflecting stubborn arrogance and double standards without real vision, strength or political willpower. Europe still has a chance and hopefully an imperative to return to the abandoned idea of the Common European Home and transnational European democratization. This move, however, will not be and cannot be an easy or rapid development. Its conditions and consequences are severe and need to be carefully framed and contemplated. Such a contemplation and deliberation pre-supposes a move away from elite-driven integration by finding the means for a new dialogue among equal partners based on mutual respect and long term interests.

7) Global Anarchy instead of the Monopolar World System

Western triumphalism – the misinterpretation of the cataclysmic and historic changes and the subsequent drawing of false conclusions from it for future actions – did not aid global developments. It did not help the two parts of Europe to start a new process of integration with a clear vision about the purpose, the method and the burden-sharing. It did not help the US to strengthen its position as the leading global power and it did not help the rest of the regions and continents who took the EU and Europe as a model for regional integration and peaceful cooperation (like MERCOSUR, the African Union, etc.). The only player who probably benefited from the emerging global anarchy and uncertainty was China by successfully combining the worst elements of uncontrolled turbocapitalism with authoritarian state socialism/communism.

The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 projected and magnified all the hidden weaknesses of the European construction, i.e., the lack of high quality leadership, lack of capability for rapid and clear reactions in cases of emergency, the lack of real cross border solidarity in the case of a threatening collapse of a member

after-the-fall-of-communism/ (accessed 23 January 2020). or European Commission: 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The state of integration of East and West in the European Union. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/east-west_integration.pdf (accessed 27 January 2020) or Lan Bui-Wrzosinska: States of Change: Attitudes in East and Central Europe 30 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Open Society Foundations. 2019. Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/states-of-change-attitudes-in-central-and-eastern-europe-30-years-after-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall> (accessed 27 January 2020)

state's economy (the Euro-crisis combined with the Greek crisis and the threat of Grexit); but most importantly Europe fell back to and remained caught in the nation state paradigm. However big and economically strong Germany is compared to most of the other member states, its short term economic and stability interests cannot be mixed up with pursuing long-term European values. Its economic policy cannot be superimposed upon any other member states. Trying to act, for first time after WWII as *primus inter pares*, Germany gave a series of politically and morally wrong answers and signals to fellow EU member states. The superimposition of austerity policies and the undemocratic decision making via the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund) undermined its reputation as the champion of political correctness and caused new splits and conflicts at the same time reinforcing old cliches and prejudices within the European community. The old German question surfaced under new circumstances: Germany being too big for Europe and too small for the world.

30 Years After: The Battle for the Soul of Europe and for Our Better Angels

The first stage of the power struggle for the Soul for Europe was won by the masters and guardians of the neo-liberal world order such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission itself. (and its unaccountable guardian institutions) and their fellow-traveller assistants/subordinates, the incorporated nation-states. This peculiar neoliberal economic-political paradigm gained an impetus in 1989 and has been dominant up until recently. Cross border solidarity was replaced by national egotism and corporate global/regional (uncontrollably intertwined) interests. "There is no Liberty without Solidarity" was the famous slogan in 1989 and earlier: "There is no Solidarity in Liberty" was noticed by disenchanting Solidarity leader Zbigniew Bujak 30 years later (Bujak 2020).

After a series of accumulating and intertwined crises the supposedly unquestionable neo-liberal paradigm (upon which the End of History theorem was built) started to lose its grip, and the erosion of the neo-liberal order began. In the short decade between 2005-2015 it has lost a great deal of its credibility and attractiveness after the 2008 crisis in Europe and globally. Demonstrated against by national, regional, and global social movements (Occupy Wall street, Occupy Europe, Indignados, Podemos, and more recently by climate change movements), the increasingly anti-democratic and elite-character of the ideological expression of the neo-liberal world order and liberal democracy has been revealed.

In the new epoch of the Great Interregnum (Bauman, 2012) or the New Age of Uncertainty (Hankiss, 2018) the world system is unable to regain its balance and, as a result, fragmentation and disintegration coexist with strong countertendencies, e.g., attempts at further integration and supranational democratization. In this rather chaotic constellation so-called wild or wicked problems occur, many times equations without solutions. In the new age of uncertainty new and unexpected players enter the stage. Those, who were seen not so long ago as insignificant, suddenly gain influence. The outcome of global transformation processes is unpredictable. The weakening and

emptying out of Western civilization has left behind a power vacuum. After 1989, European integration continued without a clear leadership or visions based on a common purpose. After the crises, new initiatives have been launched by the European elite for the “Soul of Europe” without much success. The war of paradigms has not yet brought any final results: liberal democracies have fallen into a confidence trap (Runciman 2015) and will likely remain there. Nationalistic right-wing or left-wing “populist” movements are also entrapped in a paradox: they are unable to offer any solutions by and in themselves: they need the European stage, the legal, institutional and economic framework, for their campaigns’ visibility and survival. The death of democracies is usually followed by the birth of a new kind of democracy. In case of a positive scenario, the decline of liberal democracy will likely and possibly be followed by a post-liberal civil democracy (Philippe Schmitter’s 2018 phrase somewhat modified).

Among the many new and unexpected players of the Great Interregnum we can find cross border global and regional movements, brave intellectuals, networks of dedicated professionals, city assemblies and regional government groupings. Within the European orbit such a new grouping is Central Europe (V4 + as it is called today). Central Europe as a notion and framework of cultural belonging and political solidarity played an important, system- transcending role during the Cold War. In many ways it was the geographic and cultural frame of concrete solidarity actions. During the decades of the post ’89 neo-liberal paradigm, the only legitimate and recognized player was the individual nation state. Any forms of non-state, cross border cooperation has been considered redundant, or ideologically driven and seriously disregarded. After a long time of gestation and hesitation, most recently the V4 group gained some prominence in the context of the impasse of the European integration and increasing global turbulence. “New Europe” is aspiring to its own name. It might become one of the driving forces of a possible European renewal. *Nomen est omen*.

A New European Paradox?

Within the turbulence of the past decade, a new European paradox has emerged. The question arises whether populism has become the midwife of a reinvigorated European democracy. Amidst the present global anarchy and stalled European integration, the EU cannot anymore ignore the affirmation of Central European history, culturally ingrained values and aspirations. The 2019 European Parliamentary elections resulted in a breakthrough in European politics in an unexpected way. For the first time in post-Cold War history, conflicts and interests found a larger transnational audience. Paradoxically, thanks to the innovative character and language of right-wing parties and movements, politics appeared at the European level: in other words, as an unintended consequence nationalistic populism has contributed a great deal to the long-awaited birth of transnational democratization via the opening of the European political space. The European public at large is more informed than ever before about the internal political affairs, aspirations and world views of small and “far away” countries.

Eurobarometer, PEW and other opinion polls show that European citizens identify with the EU and want EU institutions more than ever (PEW 2019; Eurobarometer 2019). Paradoxically, “populism”, at the end of the day, has successfully strengthened the EU and the process of supranational democracy by stirring up dead waters. In short: open political conflict has played a constructive role.

Post-liberal Civil Democracy and the Central Europeanization of Europe

The various new roles Central Europe (V4+) can play, both within the EU orbit and between the EU and its candidates as well as their contested neighbours, might give a new impetus to European integration. This new potential dynamism might lead to a redefinition of the methods of the European construction as well as to experimentation with and reinvention of politics and public life in a post-liberal civil democracy. Between a never-ending Brexit (a real Britannicum, indeed) and the protracted and frozen conflict between Russia and the Ukraine, Central European resilience and creativity might find new ways (maybe productive solutions) towards an alternative and less gloomy future. The spirit and message of '89 and the Velvet Revolutions might resurface under more complex and less promising circumstances of today's world by bringing back hope, co-operation and solidarity to the European stage and beyond. As elaborated elegantly and in detail in a recent essay by Emil Brix and Erhard Busek, the Central-Europeanization of Europe might bring us closer to a new version of Gorbachev's long forgotten suggestion and aspiration about our common European home (Busek-Brix 2018).

Our Chances Amidst the Global Anarchy of New Geo-politics

The world system (including all of its major components) has lost its capacity to reach equilibrium. It will either transform into a qualitatively different system or will bifurcate and fall into chaos. Being undetermined, the system does not confine, or does it in much lesser way, the activity of new, previously insignificant players. This provides a chance for more public and political activity in both positive and negative ways. This is what Wallerstein called the situation of relative free will (Miszlivetz 2010). This allows us and our communities to take advantage of a rare chance to act and opt for better solutions, although this does not mean that we will create a better world over night and success is not guaranteed. We also need aggregated political will power to realize this chance. One cannot predict whether the outcome of thousands of interacting and counteracting movements, initiatives, coalitions and individual players will end positively or not. The chances for both less and more democracy, freedom and human dignity are open.

If the EU is to become a significant player, striving for a more democratic and less unjust and unequal world, Europeans have to be able to cope with enormous challenges and countervailing tendencies. For the time being chances for a positive scenario look gloomy. Centrifugal forces seem to possess more dynamics, and there is more disintegration and disagreement about integration and less consensus within the European orbit. Without moving towards a new version of democracy, e.g., postliberal civil democracy which widens the scope, the size and scale of democratic decision

making (Schmitter 2018), we will not have a chance to act as a larger community in order to promote a sustainable future. A better understanding of Europe's potential in the transforming world system presupposes a European New Deal based upon a New European Social Contract (Holland 2014). This is a potential common denominator which might bind more closely together Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern Europeans. This is a purpose around which Central Europeans can re-vitalize their European belonging. We need to call upon the better angels of our natures (Meacham 2018) to help us to understand and accept that there is more that unites us than divides us.

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