



N° 341 – February 2006

faith and development

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CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Between the socialist past and the European future the delicate mutation of civil societies

by Lidmila Němcová *

How to pass from the forced sharing to the consent sharing? How to build, on the ruins of a forced socialism, the modern East European societies, respecting principles of solidarity and liberty of the European Union? In the following article Lidmila Němcová does not hide disillusion born from the downfall of the Berlin wall in 1989 nor the fractures fomented since that time by apparition of a pure and hard capitalism, in favour namely of privatisation cycles and of the emerging new class of entrepreneurs.

Originality of this text consists in well defined bets on the European Union, if this really wants to integrate its new members from the Eastern part of the continent. The author makes it clear that in absence of a real cultural and social convergence the integration of eight new countries members once under the Soviet tutelage will pass away its principal aim and will provoke rapidly a wave of frustrations. The author essentially affirms that the idea according to which the only aim of an economic prosperity in the womb of the club of

twenty-five is not sufficient enough. For a successful incorporation of its new adherents Europe – facing to bad or almost bad results in the course of last years – has to make a better offer than rates of growth.

Another virtue of this article is that it considers the politic mutations of the Eastern Europe in their historical context. The new countries members of the Union are not at all any young countries, far from it. On the contrary they constitute one of the historical cores of the continent, its crucial cell for the exchanges with the Orient.

Therefore a failure of their insertion would mean to add to the political chessboard of Europe a new cultural fracture between the self-assured West and the unstable Eastern lung searching its own identity. The European ambition and the concern about a really shared development command to do everything for avoiding any pitfall.

Richard Werly

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From the first of May 2004, the number of countries members of the European Union has passed to 25. Henceforth the Union covers eight new countries members formerly belonging to the bloc of the socialist countries of the East: Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Czechoslovakia (since 1993 divided into the Czech and Slovak Republics). The other European countries of this bloc continue respectively to be candidates for their entry to the Union.

The bloc of socialist countries was constituted in Europe and in other parts in the world after the World War II (the

USSR and Mongolia were proclaimed as socialist countries already before that War). This bloc is often being perceived as a homogeneous group forgetting that it consists of very diverse countries. Their only common characteristic feature is the fact that they were applying the same socialist model – a model which has been after all miscarried. The history of these countries, their characteristic features, their economic situations and policies, levels of democracy they achieved were and still continue to be very different. Their admission to the European Community is simply due to the fact that they have responded to economic criteria as fixed by the Union.

It is possible to ask in what are influenced these new countries members by the Union and vice versa. What do they offer to the Community across their historical, cultural, social experiences and by their natural wealth? At first it is possible to notice the addition of nine new languages to the ensemble of official languages of the European Union (to the eight national languages also the Russian has been added which is spoken by Russian minorities in the Baltic countries). But these new countries members bring with them also many other differences tied with the geography, with the populations, with the economic level, with the time wage of

labour force, etc. It has to be added that all these countries are opening their markets to European export products, to the financial capital, to the labour force, to new ideas, to the new technology, know how, etc.

Nowadays when evaluating the post-socialist period it is already possible to mark the tendencies and perspectives, even if the period which has just passed is too brief for pretending to make a complete and definitive evaluation.

The particularly moved History

Anybody who does not know the history of these countries is unable to apprehend the present reality. In order to be able to seize the tendencies, which have marked both, the previous and actual development, it is necessary to understand well their History – a History particularly moved. It is characterised by numerous changes of dynasties and governments as well as by complete transformations of political regimes. As an example the Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed in October 1918 as one of the countries succeeding the Empire of Austria - Hungary disintegrated as the result of the World War I. Nevertheless the principality which later constituted as the kingdom of Bohemia (territory situated in the Western part of Czechoslovakia) was existing here already in the 9-th century but its sovereignty was suppressed by the same Empire of Austria - Hungary in the 17-th century! After leaving the communist bloc, Czechoslovakia will be again divided in 1993 into two states: the Slovak and the Czech Republics.

Having in mind this History it is necessary to mention also that these territories, considered to be strategic in the heart of Europe, are situated just at the crossroad of very different national and religious cultures (Slavonic, German, Jewish...) interconnecting various nations and nationalities (ethnic minorities). Important trading ways cross here as well.

After the World War II the Great Powers (in Tehran and especially at Yalta) determined the zones of their influence. They decided about the future of the states put under the dependence of the USSR, separated from the West by the iron curtain (including the Eastern part of Germany). Important forced reversals and changes of frontiers (Germany, Poland, USSR) were realised in these countries. After their forced integration to the Soviet influence zone

some rapprochement of them took place. They had to be submitted to the policy of expropriation of private means of production, to the nationalisation of the industry and of other branches of national economics, to the collectivisation in the agriculture, to the introduction of the centralised planning system... The Marxism - Leninism became the official state ideology, the leading role of the working class and of the Communist Party were reinforced. Finally these countries were integrated from the military point of view into the Warsaw Treaty and from the economic point of view into the Council of Mutual Economic Aid.

In the face of hard and brutal dictatorships of the communist regimes (especially in the 50-ies) uprising of people appeared, particularly in Hungary (1956) and in Czechoslovakia (1968). These revolts were oppressed in the blood by the tanks of military forces of the USSR and of the Warsaw Treaty. In 1981 Poland with the movement *Solidarność* will be able at least partially to open the vice. But it will be still necessary to wait for the *perestroika* in the USSR to achieve a light liberalisation of these regimes and finally to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 to assist to the following split of the whole bloc as well as of the Soviet Union. It is indispensable to comprehend this chaotic and dramatic History for understanding difficulties with which are confronted the ex-socialist countries of the Eastern Europe in their march towards the democracy.

Great illusions

Today it is possible to begin with balancing accounts of the sixteen years passed since the end of the communist regimes. Nevertheless to realise it is no easy matter because the actors are still present in the political and social life of these countries. Also the experts in the economic history and politics go through difficulties in presenting definitive and objective results.

In general revolutions give impulsion to other changes in the development of the whole society. Following factors are being disclosed as decisive: ideas, Utopia, even the force. This last one is no more in use. The revolutions of the 90-ies in the interior of the ex-socialist countries were in fact proceeded without

any military intervention and without any violence – except Romania. Therefore the revolution of Prague in 1989 has been qualified as the velvet revolution.

In events coming after these revolutions the ideas, representations or dreams concerning the future have differentiated from one generation to another depending from personal experiences. In this way it has been also discovered that there were great illusions about the modes of life as practised in the Western world. Other divergences appeared in respect to time needed for the transformation process in economics and for changes in the society. But there was neither recipe for an ideal way nor any verified experience in other countries being in the same situation.

In such a situation people had great ideals and important expectations. They were thinking that it was necessary on the one hand to put away everything what was wrong and on the other to improve everything what was unable to be conserved. In general they wanted to combine guaranties offered by the former regime as to employment, salaries, etc. with advantages of the capitalist system and of the democracy. The socialism was assuring certain social guaranties in more regards (except democracy in classical sense) but it is needed to know that this was accompanied by a paternalist behaviour of the state. The citizens had to be conformed with instructions and tasks given by the state (in both economic and political domains) and formulated by the national communist parties as well as by the interests of the USSR and of the whole socialist bloc.

Nowadays it is possible to observe a certain nostalgia of that segment of the population (rather aged) that for an important period of life was adapted to the totalitarian system. These people are not gratified with the economic market system and their adaptability to hard capitalism conditions is very problematical. Exposed to scepticism in elections they prefer rather parties of a left orientation including communists.

A modern market society

In all countries of the post-socialist bloc a common base for a modern

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market society has been established. Nevertheless some different approaches can be observed in the course of the transformation of socialist economics into the capitalist system. E.g. in the Czech Republic the privatisation was mostly realised by means of vouchers but the pure and simple restitution of properties confiscated by the socialist regime or the reparation of injustices were applied as well. In other countries other forms were preferred, e. g. a direct sale of the propriety.

Numerous discussions have been focussed on the time needed for realising the process of privatisation. In all circumstances there was a consensus of the society in favour of the rapidity. New economic and social relations were established, including a new stratification of the society with a new category of entrepreneurs.

All countries had to pass the period of *Gründerkapitalismus* (hard capitalism of the 19-th century). Naturally there were other possible ways, e.g. participation of employees to benefits. The principal aim was to rejoin the level of life in the developed countries and the free modern society of market. It has to be noticed that in general all that was done omitting to take into consideration the importance of values. A free modern society of market has been established. In fact people wanted to profit in the same time the market as well as the liberty (practically unlimited) and the democracy.

The responsibility of every citizen

The new system required to change the legislation in all sectors of life. It was necessary to pass new laws in a very rapid way. These new laws have caused numerous lacunas by the ignorance or by a bad knowledge of the market economics principles and of the democracy. It was easy to design contours of the laws and there was lot of dishonest people not hesitating "to change their coats". The legislative standards were not always respected. For most of the time they were not yet defined or it was difficult to request them. Despite all these mistakes and errors a considerable progress has been achieved as to the new political system as well as to the reconstruction of democracy.

Moreover the written law is not sufficient to cover all situations which may occur. The law is a minimum basis of ethics. Therefore it is necessary to cultivate and to develop this ethical spirit

at the womb of the society by changing the behaviour of citizens: they should be deprived from their passivity in the sense of responsibility. Many things depend from the state the legislation of which limits all kinds of activities. But many other things depend from the citizen. In consequence the citizen cannot wait in a complete passivity what the state will do for him attributing him in the course of time all misfortune. As to the politicians they cannot any more limit their promises only into the frame of the electoral campaign by pretending to cure any evil of the society – what cannot be promised at all. The key to the future - that is to take responsibility of every citizen with regard to himself and to the others. «*Love your fellow man as yourself!*» recommends the Bible.

In the moment of entry to the European Union people were discussing about Europe exclusively from the economic point of view: what will be consequences of the privatisation, of accepting Euro, of the strategic defence, of the money dictatorship etc. The refuse of the European Constitution by France and Netherlands has open a dialogue about the future of Europe, about its future representation including the post-socialist countries. From now people ask what the entry to the European Union has really brought us except the legislation which had to be harmonised with that of the Union.

It seems as an urgent matter to open perspectives and to let the European laws to be respected. It is also needed to assure the probity of politicians, their honesty and the moral behaviour of them as well as that of media. In the course of the latest period after a certain number of economic and political scandals, the immoral cases have been denounced and sanctions have been taken against culpable representatives of the economic and political life who had to quit their posts and positions.

Nevertheless it is but very poorly spoken about the values of cultural and social Europe what should be the final aim. The spiritual foundations are underestimated when the Man is appreciated exclusively as a function of his success, of his position in the society, of the profit realised by him. We need to define the Man not in function of his efforts but of his respect defending human dignity.

Priority to the man

The construction of Europe will not be veritably possible without putting the Man to the foreground, without recognising rights, capacities and know how of everybody, without resisting to the materialist corruption.

The European humanist values are important marks. But the so-called liberal values of the Western Europe which penetrated into the society of the ex-socialist countries as a result of changes occurred in the 90-ies have emphasised individualism and searching of the personal profit to the detriment of solidarity with the fellow men. The expressions like solidarity, trade unions, co-operatives are being depreciated because perceived as remembering the period of socialism.

Nevertheless our future, our role, our cultural identity in womb of the Europe of twenty-five do not depend but from us. But what a role can we play there? What can be done by the small European nations when returning in our memory to the events passed? In face of being afraid by a possible loss of our national identity it is necessary to remember the words of the Czech ex-president Václav Havel : « *That's we ourselves who can deprive us of our identity. There is nobody in Brussels or elsewhere who would be able to do it for us. The character and development of this identity depend exclusively on ourselves.* »

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In fact the ex-socialist countries want to become members of the European Union with full rights on the basis of solidarity, dialogue and mutual consensus. But the anxiety continues as to the way which will be used to solve social problems (reforms of the retirement system, public health, conditions of living for the aged persons...) as well as those of the environment. This will principally touch the economically feeble people (retired, ill, handicapped, families with many children or monoparental families). Moreover new and unexpected phenomena as terrorism have appeared with the globalisation process.

The civil society is in route

In the post-socialist countries the process of forming the civil society is in route but a clear vision is missing. Since the entry to the European Union the

citizens – as well as politicians and elite – have not yet achieved precise perspectives and have not yet defined their priorities. Moreover they do not possess methods how to use them.

It has to be loudly proclaimed that the New Europe should be social and cultural, guarantying ethics. But in the same time it is necessary to say that such an aim cannot be achieved without any participation of citizens. Economics have to serve to the Man and not vice versa. It is not a question of technical and economic efficacy but also a question of the responsibility of every individual and of the respect to human dignity. It is needed to be attached to the dignity and humanity without making privileges to one or another.

The civil society is called to think collectively over what should be done "for people and with people». This is impossible when the dialogue does not exist, particularly the social dialogue. It would be necessary to engage public discussions about this subject and about the content of values, by giving to everybody the capacity of thinking over such objects as democracy, liberty, solidarity, subsidiarity, responsibility. Everything should be founded on the values of liberty but it is necessary to determine for whom and in whose name this liberty should be performed. The liberty is not something unlimited, it has

to be regulated in the frame respecting a free will of everybody.

In all countries of central and Eastern Europe one may see a deficit of lessons and of education with respect to future needs and new visions of the society. Nevertheless it is spoken about an education system lasting for the whole life and accessible to all strata of population – aged citizens included - with the aim to extend and to intensify their qualification and their knowledge. Thus it would be possible to complete the qualification and the education without limiting the access to anybody.

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In order to return to the civil society, one may see presently besides a variety of political parties an important growing of non government organisations (NGO) in numerous sectors of the society. Other

forms of initiations also begin to exist. As an example let us mention consumers organisations, ethical banks, fair trade, etc. All of them can be characterised on one side by the voluntary work of their members, on the other by an effort to improve the identity of the organisation, their coordination with the volunteers, their searching of sponsors, etc. Moreover these NGO make efforts to co-ordinate their activities by constituting themselves in national or international networks. Nevertheless the population

has not yet taken into consideration the force represented by these organisations in the process of constructing the civil society.

Many discussions are focussed also on the role of churches. In the post-socialist countries there are mostly Christian churches but we see also Buddhists, Muslims and people belonging to various sects beginning to exist in our societies. Therefore it is important to develop an inter-religious dialogue.

Presently when the religious liberty is recognised and when any surveillance or risk no more exist for the believers, one can perceive a certain loss of the faith what is difficult to be explained. Nevertheless in their principal mission - o be "the salt of the Earth" - the churches have an exceptional opportunity: they are able to change the orientation of the believers towards other priorities than that focussed only on the consumption. They are also responsible to nourish their hopes for the future of a society which would be fairer and show solidarity than that of nowadays.

The young people who did not make any experience with the socialist regimes have to take a priority position in the future perspectives of our societies. Exactly these young people will be actors and leaders of the future civil society. Their education to the democracy is the key and hope for tomorrow.

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FAITH AND DEVELOPMENT Registration number (for the French version) : 57163 - ISSN 0339 – 0462

Original French title "Foi et Développement" published since 1972 by the Centre L. J. Lebreton.
(10 issues/year for the French version°. Only certain issues are available in English since 2001)

A list of published articles is available on request.

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Subscription rate : per issue : 4 € – 5 US\$ - 7 CHF

annual subscription : 38 € – 46 US\$ - 60 CHF

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