

REINVENTING CENTRAL EUROPE

Ferenc Mészlivetz¹

The New Situation

With the end of the Cold War and the placing of eastern enlargement on the agenda, a new situation arose that required a different kind of understanding and analysis, and a different form of practice in its management. Among decision-makers in the worlds of politics and academia, it has still not been entirely recognised that for Europe, in this historically new situation, there are no prescribed recipes or well-trodden paths to follow; and that there are too many pitfalls for us „to allow things to take their own course.” There is no compass to point the way, and few from whom we would even accept directions.

In short, Europe has become mired in uncertainty that it does not want to face. It is characterised by individual interests smothering or at cross purposes from each other. Its proclaimed policies and guiding principles are scarcely or inconsistently carried through, and it has a lack of persuasive power, broadly mobilising programmes and consensus-backed, long-term strategic concepts.

Values, Prejudices

As an additional legacy of the Cold War, the „walls in the heads” have remained and deeply influence our actions, perceptions, expectations and prejudices.

Earlier enlargements of the European Union were greeted by the European community as strengthening processes, with existing differences viewed as an important source of renewal. The idea of an expansion eastward, on the other hand, was cloaked in growing fear since it was first placed on the official agenda, a fear deriving mainly from the conviction that the conflicts of values and interests would be unmanageable and potentially lead to the paralysis of the Union itself. Although the majority of the Union’s citizens appreciate the inevitability of internal institutional reforms, their introduction is nevertheless perpetually delayed. A markedly strong public antipathy has been aroused towards the perception that the progress of „internal” reforms is determined by „external” factors. This characteristic relationship or „collision” between the „external” and the „internal” is often at the forefront within the newest phase of European integration. The generally held opinion is that the process of eastern enlargement and the difficulty of integrating new member states is to be blamed for the sharpening internal problems within the European Union.

East – West – Centre – Periphery

In contrast to commonly circulated clichés and stereotypes, “irreconcilable,” value-related and socio-economic differences are in reality not unequivocally and homogeneously typical of divisions in East and Central Europe. During the Cold War, the two clearly distinct halves of Europe did indeed become homogenised to a certain degree – although we now know that

¹ Director, Institute for Social and European Studies.

differences in culture and value systems never disappeared entirely from within each bloc. In the time that has elapsed since then, however, the transformation of Eastern and Central European societies and the irresistible consolidation of the processes of globalisation, has led to large scale diversification within groups of states and even within individual societies.

The latest surveys show, for example, that the socio-economic gap between the northern and southern member states has narrowed, although adding that „differing regional interests are reflected in the alliances and coalitions formed between member states.” Under the conditions of competition dictated by the global economy, some regions are able to successfully surmount the obstacles to become „globalised,” while others are squeezed out to the periphery into a position of dependence. The division between the centre and the periphery in Europe cuts across the borders of states, breaking through the division between East and West to unite experiences and interests on the sub-state level.

Harmonisation

The most difficult challenge of enlargement is for the EU and non-EU countries and regions to harmonise amid increasingly intense and unpredictable global competition.

The *acquis communautaire*, whose adoption the new members undertook as a condition set by the EU, were not designed for semi-peripheral economies struggling with grave structural problems, nor for countries with peripheral agricultural sectors (such as Poland).

To ignore these decisive structural differences may do great harm to those countries wishing to join and catch up with the countries of the Union at any price, and may in the long term signify considerable surplus expenditures for the EU by prolonging the subsidisation of economies that are unable to cope with the additional burdens.

The Axis of Progress: The Positive Expansion Scenario

Regional cooperation across borders may act as an axis for economic progress throughout Europe. In a positive scenario, this might speed up the integration of the first wave of new EU members by stimulating economic growth, and might also help ensure that no new obstacles, political or economic tensions are created between the countries admitted and the other associate or candidate countries in the East Central and Southeast European regions.

In order for this positive scenario to become reality, there is a need for intensive and comprehensive planning and foresight in the eastern and southern border regions of the EU. This, however, requires a considerably more flexible approach than the present Schengen regulations provide. It needs to be able to manage the „external” and „internal” factors in a dynamic fashion. The example of the Ukrainian-Polish border, where in the mid-1990s unofficial border trade accounted for some 25% of Poland’s total trade, and 50% in the case of Ukraine, is to be avoided among the first new members. As a consequence of enhanced border controls taking the Schengen approach, both Poland and its eastern neighbours have suffered significant material damage. The question of exactly who has benefited from the Schengen *acquis* still awaits an answer. It is at this point that the problem of the „external” and the „internal” crops up once again.

The Schengen *acquis* constitutes an increasingly rigorous demand on the new member countries, and is a significant and growing source of tension among the EU’s basic and guiding principles related to integration and expansion.

Central and Eastern Europe increasingly finds itself in the role of a buffer zone. The traffic in illegal migrants, together with the illegal drug trade, are just two of the most flourishing branches of organised criminal activity, the handling of which is beyond the means of the new member states alone. Stricter controls will in all probability serve only to drive up the prices charged by human smugglers. The new member states dare not refuse the new/old role assigned to them, but rather give in to the indirect blackmail of older EU members, who – placing their own „internal” short-term interests to the fore – shift the burden of migrants and refugees arriving in or intending to depart for their countries onto their weaker partners.

Illegal migration should be treated as a pan-European problem requiring the division of responsibilities and the formulation of common strategies. It could signify an outstanding opportunity for close cooperation, continuous consultation and the establishment of a partnership between the European Union, the new Central European member states, candidate countries and would-be candidates, as well as those who might never become part of the EU but who will certainly remain neighbors.

The present eastern borders of the EU can no longer be treated as a physical dividing line according to the classic model of the nation-state. These borders can no longer be exclusively referred to as the sphere of operation of the law enforcement apparatus. Attempts at rendering the borders impenetrable are doomed to failure, serving only to increase instability and shatter the economic and cultural contacts between neighbouring countries; in other words, impeding the emergence of regional civil societies that play a key role in the broadening and deepening of integration.

The significance of external borders in the case of evolving political entities is particularly great. Their formation, the introduction of relevant regulations and the management of border-related problems carry a symbolic message far beyond the simple borders themselves. For precisely this reason an unusual degree of sensitivity can be expected on the part of the new neighbours. The contacts evolving with these new neighbours will decisively determine the European Union’s new place in the world. This will be true even if the new eastern borders prove to coincide with those of the present.

New Chances for Regional Crossborder Cooperation before and after Enlargement

The creation of regional policies and Euro-regions has belonged for a long time to the economic and political priorities of the EU. The next step in the spatial extension of European integration, eastern enlargement, raises the questions of new potential Euro-regions which cross the eastern borders of the Union. As the first eastern enlargement itself largely differs from previous enlargements and required more comprehensive preparation, the emergence of regions around the eastern borders of the EU and beyond will be more unpredictable and rich with new challenges. The almost half century division and its consequences, the differences in institutions and mentality, infrastructure, economy and income level, do not help to buttress quick adjustment. The process of regionalization presupposes increased social networking. This process has been slowed by insufficient initiatives, social innovation and creativity; although many counter-examples can be given of those who worked for a long time in isolation and lacked the critical amount of self-confidence and capacity.

In the macro-regional structure of Central Europe, from the Baltics to the Balkans, historic cities and the smaller regions around them played and play a decisive role and help to identify the division lines between the center and periphery. There is a recognizable “West-East developmental slope” in the region which becomes a sharp precipice at the eastern borders.

Thus the western border region of East Central European countries is a decisive area for future macro-regional development, while the eastern zone is the real periphery that has only a slight chance of catching up.

It is true that the area determined by Gdansk-Poznan-Wroclav-Prague-Brno-Bratislava-Vienna-Budapest is an attractive zone for Austrian, German and other EU-based small- and medium-size enterprises. For the future development of the macro-region it is decisive whether new opportunities for competition will arise which provide long-term possibilities for development which would lift the semi-periphery into the core. A practical and concrete answer can be given to the question as to whether a semi-peripheral region can become part of the center if a solution can be found to avoid friction between the West-East developmental slope at the “eastern wall.” In other words, one has to figure out how to break down or dismantle the “eastern wall” itself. This question is fundamental for all those involved in regional planning and development in EU member countries. The most plausible solution is to construct complex developmental programs which are targeted at existing or potential fracture lines. That is, instead of recognizing and accepting the newly developed socio-economic structures and in doing so petrifying existing fault lines, these fault lines should be softened, and turned into a gentle slope rather than a sharp precipice. This suggested scenario has a set of hard economic, political and social components. To harmonize them one needs the consensus-seeking ability and intention for cooperation from all the major players: the various lobby and interest groups, the different governmental levels (national, regional, EU) and the involvement and empowerment of new actors such as the micro-regions and the networks of civil society. This would be possible only if players were ready to put their short-term interests in parenthesis and concentrate on medium- and long-term strategic development. This kind of non-centralized, not from above command, which targets positive sum games has a fairly modest tradition in East and Central Europe. The historic chance to join the European Union has not only increased the opportunity for shifts in attitude and mentality, but has made it a prerequisite for success.

It is not illusory to launch an unprecedented process of collaborative thinking, a mutually structured dialogue within which EU member states with eastern borders, national and regional governments, concerned EU committees, regional development agencies, municipalities, NGOs and civil networks, can take part equally. The conditions exist for this crossborder dialogue which could transcend old and new, political and mental borders, in the major part of Central Europe.

Hard and Soft Borders

Migration will continue even if expansion is postponed. The fundamental question is not the scale of the migratory influx, but rather to what extent the EU’s restrictive measures will force migrants along illegal channels, and how great the cost of all this may be in social, political and ultimately economic terms.

The most obvious and effective solution based on a realistic consideration of the trends would be to reform the rigid labour market regulations in Western Europe and the provision of more realistic employment quotas and suitable working conditions for migrants arriving from prospective member countries. This would assist these countries in successfully speeding up preparations for their economic transition and integration while reducing the pressure on borders, and last but not least, would result in greater mutual understanding, trust and cooperation, which better corresponds to the EU’s basic values and political aspirations. These positive effects may serve the common interests of both future entrants and those who already benefit from them. In so far as progress is made in terms of income and reforms in

social policy, social benefits and services, the positive dynamics of these processes may have a multiplier effect and serve to reducing the fear of soft borders.

If, however, no progress is made, it is feared that the black and grey economies will in the long term set the conditions for the stabilisation of the state dependency of the periphery on the centre. This could then become an obstacle to genuine integration and the creation of social solidarity extending to the prospective member states and could undermine the Lisbon process by rendering social and economic cohesion illusionary in the enlarged EU.

The tightening of conditions for cross-border contacts, both in relations between the new member states and new candidate would set back economic development in the border regions and sever old or newly established threads of social cooperation, ultimately triggering new and unnecessary tensions in all areas of life. There is no need to demonstrate that only losers would emerge from such a scenario.

Reinventing Central European Cooperation

Although during the 1990s the Visegrad group and CEFTA showed some success in institutionalized cooperation both in the political and economic spheres, Central Europe proved to be unable to realize and represent the joint interests of its region during accession negotiations. Narrowly defined national interests combined with political navel-gazing and the lack of a new, common vision within the new emerging polity of the European Union dominated again the political discourse. Accordingly, the result of the accession process brought unanimous disappointment among the Central European newcomers. Instead of acting according to the criteria of a win-win gain, Central Europe engaged itself again in a negative sum game.

After May 1st, 2004, the situation of Central Europe has dramatically changed. Thanks to the Big Bang Eastern Enlargement, eight out of ten new member states are from the eastern part of Central Europe; two more from the Balkans, are most likely to join in the near future. Most of the countries from the Western Balkans – the republics of former Yugoslavia – are in a more ambiguous and precarious situation. Except for Croatia which has nearly begun accession negotiations and with remarkable speed fulfilled most of the EU-set criteria, the rest can be characterized more or less by chaos and the lack of the rule of law, the continuation of violence based on ethnic hatred, an unimaginable level of corruption and growing influence of mafias not only in illegal trade but also at all levels of government. Although most of these newly born states have expressed interest in joining the EU, for the time being their chances are slim. As a consequence of this social and political frustration, they themselves feel they are being marginalized and excluded and this feeds anti-EU sentiments, increases hopelessness and alienation from the European agenda.

Central Europe's Contribution to the Lisbon Agenda

In this new constellation, the new member states from Central Europe have a chance to reinvent, or in many cases simply invent, new forms of cooperation and methods for reconciliation among each other by exploiting the new means and possibilities provided by their membership. These new and unique opportunities provided by the historic turning point of Eastern Enlargement, however, have not yet been utilized and are barely captured and understood by Central European societies and their political elite. Most people feel very far away from the Brussels-based supranational institutions, their increasingly inapt nation states, and from the feckless domestic democracies in which they live.

Inventing new forms of crossborder, regional cooperation among cities, municipalities, universities and civil organizations is therefore an inevitable criteria for revitalizing social creativity and institutional capacities throughout the region from the Baltics to the Balkans. Without the self-mobilization of civil society networks and other local and regional actors, the new EU member states will not be able to contribute to the ambitious aims of the Lisbon agenda. If they remain entrapped within their narrowly defined „national interetsts” and centralized governments, social apathy and the lack of participation in political processes will continue to dominate. The new opportunities and resources provided by membership will remain unexploited and accession could be perceived as a failure rather than a success. If this remains the case, social and economic cohesion of the New Europe will remain a vague hope on a distant horizon along with the other ambitious goals set forth in the Lisbon process.

Fortunately, there is also good news. A new generation of young intellectuals, professionals, civil society activists and students are actively engaged in crossborder, transnational networking throughout Europe. The increasingly recognized potential of crossborder Euroregions, combined with the pan-European networks in research, higher education, and culture has changed the mental maps and life and carrier perceptions and opportunities for millions in Central Europe. Reinventing Central Europe is more than just a job for them – their future depends upon it.

Networking, NGOs, think tanks and websites do possess a great potential for strengthening emerging transnational and regional civil societies and creating new public spheres which might provide alternative frameworks for deliberative democracy. New initiatives like Reinventing Central Europe are clear formulations of new opportunities which might result in a broader understanding based on renewed value systems and a more complex and comprehensive concept of political community and citizenship. Without increasing awareness in these vital areas, the position of the Central European region in Europe and in the world will be weakened to a significant degree. Understanding what binds us together is an important start to understanding the new possibilities for and benefits of regional and crossborder cooperation.