

Whose Claim and Whose Risk?

Some comments to Georg Vobruba's paper on 'The Enlargement Crisis of the European Union'

Although I am not convinced that, in general, the recent geo-political changes in Europe¹ are correctly perceived when conceptualising them as 'crisis-phenomena'², yet I fully agree with the essence of the message that Vobruba outlines in proposing some panacea for what he calls 'the enlargement crisis' of the European Union. I go with him in claiming that the traditional institutions for managing the East-West relations have to be thoroughly revised and put on new foundations both in their guiding principles and the day-to-day administration. I also go along with his realistic evaluation: though ideally a highly crystallised and widely supported set of values and moral principles should orient the indispensable reforms of decision-making and administration, yet when seeking arguments and means for more sensitivity toward the needs of the potential newcomers, it is better to calculate with the more down-to-earth motives of self-interest of those taking currently full authority over the processes of 'Europeanisation': the core Western states.

With the brief comments below, I aim at assisting this latter process. Applying here the lens of someone coming from one of the 'accession-countries' (Hungary), I would like to point to some key-dilemmas that East Central European societies face when responding to the often dubious challenges of unconditional adaptation to the prescriptions formulated clearly by the West and from the sheer perspectives of the West. Obviously, the list below is far from being exhaustive and even farther from suggesting

¹ It is important to note that the enlargement of the European Union is just one, though admittedly the most far-reaching one, among the simultaneously occurring fundamental shifts in Europe. However, one should not forget about the accompanying 'others': the ongoing expansion of the NATO, the deep reordering of inter- and intra-regional relations among the nation-states both in the Western and Eastern halves of the continent, and the reformulation of Europe's relation to the non-European parts of the world.

² All the above-listed new processes challenge the traditional institutions which worked successfully in the past, but which seem to have great difficulties in coping with the significantly changed new circumstances. Thus, they all meet Vobruba's definition for what we should consider a 'crisis'. However, such a broadening of the concept carries serious theoretical difficulties. Just a few of the puzzling questions that arise: How can one make a difference among the forms of change on these grounds; or, should one state that all important socio-political changes bring about some 'crisis' by definition? Further, from a policy-perspective: should one argue that the major institutional reforms always require some sort of 'crisis-management', thus, instead of viewing policy-makers and those in administration as representatives

any tangible solutions. However, by putting a few ‘East-driven’ considerations on the table, it is my hope to assist what I regard the first prerequisite of any future steps toward the betterment of East-West compromises on the ‘enlargement-issue’: open discussion.

Let me start by stating that, whatever price they have to pay for it, attaining membership in the European Union is simply a *must* in the eyes of the peoples of East Central Europe, and even beyond. This ‘must’ follows as much from historical experiences, as from current political needs.

As to the major historical motives, it is important to underline that, for the societies in question, accession to the European Union symbolises the return to the *normal state of affairs*. In other words, they see it as nothing else but *re-admission* to their true (though for decades, if not for centuries, ‘stolen’) historical path. In their perception, there are no alternatives to such a return and re-admission: European membership is simply the very essence, the *heart* of their *identity*. As the history of 19th century nationalism in the region shows, the formation of the new nation-states and their struggle for international recognition in the second half of the century was accompanied with their simultaneously articulated strong claims to acknowledge them as equal constituents of what ‘Europe’ of the time meant, and to do so in all apprehensible aspects of the term: cultural, political, economic, and military alike. Put differently, the claim for recognising them as new entities with their own voice was understood to recognise them also as indispensable parts of the then existing established European *community*. Obviously, it is also the historical experience of the nations of East and East Central Europe - painfully proven by two world wars and their lasting aftermath - that this dual, national and regional, identity can be questioned and forcefully taken away: actually either or both sides can be sacrificed for ‘higher’ international and military interests.

With such experiences in their minds and bones, East Central European societies today are rather well prepared to launch all kinds of long-term struggles for defending and re-gaining their European belonging. After all, the major obstacle, the Soviet rule, has disappeared from above their heads, and the rest seems a much easier task. However, while their historically informed commitment, smartness and self-determination is a

of the will of the electorate, they should be regarded mainly as experts in conflict-resolution? – Maybe, the proposed broadening should be refined to head off these and similar confusions.

source of strength and a good potential for 'adaptation', it also has to be seen that it implies a great deal of defencelessness. Since the partners in the European 'enlargement-game' do not stand on equal footing, Eastern Europe's dependent situation easily can be misused by the West. People in the region are well aware of this: the spreading popular ambivalence toward the 'enlargement-project' follows to a great extent from the often experienced Western downgrading, prejudices and attempts for subordination (all of which, too, have long traditions in the history of the continent). The recent apparent Western undertakings to apply a policy of half-inclusion/half-exclusion (see the Nice Summit, the bilateral agreements on national control over manpower-flow, etc.) are read by the people of the accession-countries as clear attempts for squeezing them into the status of secondary (European) citizenship. The immediate responses are a case for consideration also on the international level: increasing populism; attempts at fighting back through anti-market national legislation ('re-nationalisation' of property and, especially, economic management); intensified and cruel rivalry among the countries of the region for escaping downgrading through blaming and humiliating each other on the international stage³, etc. all can be understood as indications of spreading hostile anti-Western sentiments which easily can turn into outrage and explicit political attempts for reconstructing - at least, in spiritual, economic, and political terms - the 'iron curtain' between the two halves of the continent.

These troubling recent developments and foreseeable dangerous tendencies just add to what I mentioned above as the other side of the 'must': the political necessities of East Central Europe's EU-membership. Here the most important urge comes from the imbalance created by early NATO-membership and belated EU-accession. What follows from this imbalance is, first of all, a skewed economic development. In order to come up to the strict NATO-requirements in modernising their military force and weaponry, the national economies of the region increasingly have to spend on armament, thus 'eating up' much of their scarce resources, and re-establishing the unfair competition for central funds between military spending and social welfare - obviously and recurrently to the detriment of the latter. Such a skewed development implies further dangers: it gives legitimisation to the re-strengthening of interests, forces and processes outside the

³ See such attempts even among the Visegrad states.

framework of democratic decision-making and thus carries the risk of revitalising authoritarianism – again in the name of ‘higher’ international and domestic principles. It is not to say that EU-membership would automatically put an end to the deepening of such imbalances and the dangers that follow from them. However, the new conditions would at least widen the scope of considerations: NATO-required modernisation would have to openly compete with EU-required (and –funded) other important goals. Thus, decisions on priorities and spending would have to be made within the normal institutionalised routines of arriving at satisfactory compromises in matters of allocation.

In addition to the historical and political ‘musts’, the dangers of recent social development also make it a pressing need for East Central Europe to see the only way out in EU-membership. Vobruha himself refers to some of these dangers by pointing out that it is mainly the domestic elite of the societies in question which is truly interested, while the great masses of the non-elite have a great deal of skepticism and hostility toward accession. Such a sharp contrast in attitudes reflects, however, rather worrying social divisions in the background. It can be read as the manifestation of those deepening socio-economic fault-lines which have emerged between those capable of coping with the new conditions of marketisation on the one hand, and the incapable ‘others’ (the poor, ethnic/racial minorities, those living in old industrial and/or rural settings, etc.) on the other.

It is important to point briefly to some of the causes in the background.

Amid the efforts made by the subsequent East Central European governments to speed up the marketisation-process and, thus, to shorten the way to accession, it has been the financing of public provisions (welfare, healthcare, childcare, public transport, urban development, public housing, etc.) which has been seriously cut. This way, however, the groups incapable to adapt to the market have been simultaneously squeezed out also from access to the various non-market institutions and the forms of protection they are supposed to provide. By now, the outcome of such a dual squeezing-out is the formation of large groups of the outcast poor in the accession-countries.

However, this development is not simply a matter for domestic politics. The phenomenon of massive social, economic and political exclusion in the East Central European societies carries the risk of abrupt political turmoil, uncontrollable outrage, and

sharpening ethnic/racial conflicts that hardly stop at the national borders. In order to prevent such a turn of events, a thorough re-conceptualisation of the functions and roles of the state in 'not-yet-developed' market-economies (as, from time to time, East and East Central Europe's transition-economies are euphemistically called) is urgently needed – both on the national and international stages. In the light of the experiences of the past 10-12 years, one would argue that, beyond their undeniably important role in assisting privatisation, marketisation, and economic adjustment, the states' well-defined welfare-functions also have to be urgently established, institutionalised and laid down as parts and parcels of what the preconditions of EU-accession are. At the same time, it also has to be seen, that without accession, the 'desertion of the state' will remain an ongoing process in these societies, and the unstoppable process of serious social disintegration (with all what it implies) will remain the price that potentially both halves of Europe - we all - have to pay for it.

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