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New Centre, New Peripheries: the Role of Central Europe in the Changing Political Landscape

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Thank you very much for discussing Central Europe, I think in comparison with the other issues on the agenda Central Europe is not so important however Central Europe has one character in that it always makes a lot of noise and by this draws attention to its situation. My first statement on this issue is that the situation in Central Europe in this 30 years has very much improved. This is not accepted by the citizens of the different countries and also not seen by some predictions. One advantage for me is that I am a little bit older and so can remember what it was like before. Sometimes even I criticize the different kind of jubilees that we have already. The View of Central Europe in my opinion is not always very fair, correct and can be very critical because improvement is an important fact.

Center or Periphery?

I grew up at a time when the Iron curtain was 60 kilometers eastwards and 80 kilometers northwards from Vienna, my home city, and so far, I think at that time we were at the Periphery, without any doubt. The World for me, growing up and being young, ended here with the Iron curtain until 1989. There were some developments, softening up, but not solving the problem. It was quite clear for my country concerting the economy and relations at that end. Only by history the memory of the Habsburg Empire, the Donau Raum was left. It was driven by my grandparents and my parents but had no reality in fact. This is a huge difference.

Here I am a little bit critical of the current situation, as nobody is really mentioning it, what a big advantage these changes brought. I admire my German friends because they are always speaking about the Berlin wall, and so on and so on. However with the deep respect to the German neighborhood, which for an Austrian is always important, I think that the changes initiated by the downfall of the Iron Curtain were even bigger than the consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall. Congratulations to the Germans, because I think it was one of the horrible consequences of WW2 and the arrangements, or actually non-arrangements, of the four Allies. But in general, I think the real greater impact on the situation was the fact that the Eastern part of Europe belonged to the Russian Pact system, to the Soviet Empire, and this had a many of consequences.

We are now speaking a lot about migration, we also had a huge migration after the Second World War, I think millions were pushed from one place to another, which is forgotten but should be understood by Poland. The border of Poland was pushed westwards two hundred kilometers, but it was also shortened eastwards, and these consequences are really tremendous. So far that I am really happy that the question of Centre and Periphery does not really exist anymore. There is a common feeling that here is a part of Europe. Still I

want to mention that there is always one mistake concerning Europe - if we are speaking about Europe, we are considering the European Union as Europe. It is here that there is a question of periphery. Such an approach is pushing some countries from Europe to the periphery, for example Moldova or Belarus and so on. It is periphery but at the same time it is a part of Europe. I think here is an opportunity to underline this. We have to focus on it much more than we are doing. With all my friendship and respect to the Western Europeans, I think that's one of their main misconceptions that Western Europeans are not looking to this part of Europe. Understandable because for France for example, Europe ends with the Atlantic. Ok, no problem. I think that if there would have been a part of Europe reaching the French Atlantic coast a little bit more westwards, there might be another approach.

Here is my first remark under the auspices of Periphery. There is a certain feeling of Periphery existing among the Eastern member states of the European union, and for sure with the Eastern Europeans which are not part of the European Union, that they are pushed to the Periphery and are not seen and not really accepted. Not only their problems. Everyone is speaking about the problems, but, and I think this we should underline that: this is extremely different.

We've devoted a lot of time concerning Central Asia. By the way, I have to mention, that by the rules of the United Nations, Central Asia is a part of the economic cooperation for Europe within the United Nations. It was coming out of the downfall of the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union was a part of this UN organization. So far, it has stayed there. But do not underestimate it. It has some importance in addition to what is being discussed here.

So far if you are looking to Centers, we have a lot of Centers. We have really good development of capitals in central Europe, they are really vivid, with clear feeling that they are within an urban area of Europe. A problem, with regard to a type of periphery, is that some rural areas are falling down due to depopulation. It is here that, I think, migration is playing a really important role. If you are going eastward from Belgrade, along the river Danube, you might come across an area which is totally depopulated in Serbia. Travelling further over the border to Romania to Craiova and it's also totally depopulated. Going a little bit south-eastwards to Bulgaria, it's also totally depopulated. I think all that left there are the Gypsies. This needs to be clear: this is creating a lot of problems and no one is doing anything about it. I can criticize the governments who are in charge. We've made some proposals with money of the European Union but they are not really interested due to different reasons. So far Periphery does exist there? but in the sense of the vital Center – no.

I should add some criticism of the European Union here. I think our feeling within the EU concerning Center is for sure limited by Paris, Berlin,

Brussels, Northern Italy and so on...I think what we are really missing is an understanding for the Central Eastern parts of Europe. I was always fighting during my time in politics the expression "Eastern enlargement" because it was delivering a feeling that we were 'taking in the East', but it is actually Central Europe which we took in! And I think from here arises a certain perception of the Periphery within the European Union which is a strong mistake. I'm unhappy with many articles in all these newspapers, mainly in European newspapers, they are writing pages and pages about the misunderstanding with the Eastern member states of the European Union. Why are they criticizing? Why are they not happy? Why are there certain developments with the shift to the right with the kind of radicalism? And so on, and so on... This is the result of this. I think the reason could be partly found among the Western members of the European Union and we have to say it quite clearly. So far, the great understanding of this is that not all they say is correct but it has to be mentioned.

Common identity of Central Europe

Here you have to start with a definition. I may tell you that to define where Central Europe begins or ends is impossible. 33 years ago, Emil Bricks and I in our first book defined it as "*system of moving walls*". I think under specific conditions throughout history, the borders of Central Europe have always changed. I remember as I was starting discussion on Central Europe, Helmut Kohl was telling me: "What are you doing? You have to understand, that Germany is a part of Central Europe." And then I raised the question: what about Schleswig-Holstein or something like that? I think he was very aggressive with an answer. Because it was his imagination that Europe was something of an older Holy Roman Empire. I think this was his world which is no longer correct in a current situation here in Europe.

I think certain kind of common identity in the core countries of Central Europe really exists. By different languages. I'll give you one example, I'm in charge of some of the activities concerning the river Danube. The Danube is only the second longest river of Europe, the longest one is Volga, but the difference is that Russians are living all along the Volga. Russian's here, Russian's there, Russia at the beginning, Russia at the end. We have 14 nations along the river Danube and that's quite the difference. In a certain way there is a common identity by cultural understanding, sometimes it's outlined too much, but there is a certain feeling of this culture. That's my experience. May be it's one of the merits of the Danube monarchy which has created it? That's also sometimes mixed up. If you ask Austrians nowadays: tell me something about famous writers, they will tell you about Franc Kafka and Ödön von Horwath and so on, and so on. And I am always explaining to them that Kafka started in Prague and Horwath is of Hungarian origin. This is for sure very different.

It is a sign of common identity, and also a sign of differentiation. Here exists a really interesting subject, for sure, and I think there should be more cultural research done in this area. It's not only the outcome of economic figures, and statistics, because I think certain feelings are playing very important role in all the problems. This is because there is one common identity in Central Europe, it is *the feeling that we are not very happy and we are selling this feeling very strongly*. There is a famous writing that this area is a test session for doomsday. Nobody wants doomsday, is not believing in it, but saying it. I think there is a certain happiness that it is so horrible here. That also a kind of cultural identity, it's a reason why Sigmund Freud started in Vienna. In a certain way I think it's a psychological meta of great importance.

Russia and strong Europe in this context

I may say that it is a very interesting question. I think Russia is not interested in the strong Europe, but Russia is very much interested in close relations, which they are trying to achieve, I would say with a limited success. You're always reading the newspapers and there are some treaties between an Austrian rightist party and the Russians, and there are close connections between Russians and Viktor Orban, and there are close connections between Belgrade and the Russians, and so on, and so on. There is a certain schizophrenia existing here, they are doing it in a certain way, but if you are discussing it with them, they are not interested in being too close to the Russians. I think this is a way of kind of muddling through, living with this reality but with no real feeling. I think that you should know, and I am convinced for example that Belgrade is also Central Europe. I believe the Serbs had 40 common exercises between the Russian and the Serbian army. I asked the Serbs several times about these close relationships with Russia, and they are saying that it is mostly tactical, in reality they are looking in the other direction. Actually, I think they are looking in both directions, which is understandable if you are looking at the geographic position and historical experience, which shouldn't be underestimated, this plays a certain role. There is a famous saying by Winston Churchill that the Balkans have more history than they can consume. I think this is also true for Central Europe.

I think we have really too much history on this subject, that's the reason why we're now celebrating every day, celebrating various jubilees. One hundred years since the end of the WW1, eighty years since the start of the WW2, and so on, and so on. In my opinion this is a pure nonsense although it does play a role in certain connections. With apologies to my Hungarian friends. As I told you already, I am involved in the activities about the river Danube, and for a very long time I've had a problem with my dear Hungarian friends. "As long!"- they told me - "As long as the rivers leading to Danube are not

again a part of the Hungarian state, we don't want to discuss the Danube." I think it's a little bit changed now, this is a discussion about Trianon and I've failed for years to explain to my Hungarian friends that nobody really knows what Trianon means. That it's really only understood here, on a high level. Everybody is speaking about it, but there is no capacity to handle the problem in reality. I took it as a symbol of the role that history is playing here in this area. Internally I may say by all skepticism or pessimism, which is at home here, I think that the development over the last years was really very good. Also by the mixture which is happening, by economic investment, and so on, and so on. But at the same time don't forget that all these countries are missing labor force. One reason for this, economically it was a good situation in Hungary and Slovakia that had the European car industry. Of course there is a question for the future with all these ecological discussions. But this is another thing. On the other side I think it was also a source of migration. It is really of great importance. If you are going to a restaurant in Austria, even in the far west of the country, near Switzerland, the waiter will be a Hungarian. This is a reality. In Austria we have no difficulties with migration, we only have difficulties concerning migration of the Afghans, Chechens, Pakistanis, not with Hungarians. If you ask a common Austrian about Hungarians they will say: "Ah, they are ours... we have been together..." Sometimes we are too optimistic, but things are moving in a good direction.

So far I may say, the quality of the problems discussed with other subjects at the conference are somewhat more important for Europe, than the problems of Central Europe. But it doesn't mean that we shall forget Central Europe. There's a lot to do here. This is connected with the future of Europe. It is often forgotten that we, Europeans, EU citizens and non-EU citizens – we are only 7% of the global population. I think we have a little bit more than 20% of the productivity in the economy however we are consuming 50% of the good things of the world here. Don't say it too loud, because it might be a wakeup call for our neighbors in Africa, Asia and so on. I think here you can see also the main problems for the future. So far I am very grateful to hear that yet there have been no problems with Chinese in the neighboring countries. That's for sure ok. Sure we have problems with others but in reality these are not so important. But it is impossible to explain to Central Europeans that we have no problems. We have really fond problems. This I think one of the characteristics of my beloved area here in Europe.