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Left and Right in a Divided Europe

By Sam Vaknin

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Even as West European countries seemed to have edged to the right of the political map – all three polities of central Europe lurched to the left. Socialists were elected to replace economically successful right wing governments in Poland, Hungary and, recently, in the Czech Republic.

This apparent schism is, indeed, merely an apparition. The differences between reformed left and new right in both parts of the continent have blurred to the point of indistinguishability. French socialists have privatized more than their conservative predecessors. The Tories still complain bitterly that Tony Blair, with his nondescript "Third Way", has stolen their thunder.

Nor are the "left" and "right" ideologically monolithic and socially homogeneous continental movements. The central European left is more preoccupied with a social – dare I say socialist – agenda than any of its Western coreligionists. Equally, the central European right is less individualistic, libertarian, religious, and conservative than any of its Western parallels – and much more nationalistic and xenophobic. It sometimes echoes the far right in Western Europe – rather than the center-right, mainstream, middle-class orientated parties in power.

Moreover, the right's victories in Western Europe – in Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy – are not without a few important exceptions – notably Britain and, perhaps, come September, Germany. Nor is the left's clean sweep of the central European electoral slate either complete or irreversible. With the exception of the outgoing Czech government, not one party in this volatile region has ever remained in power for more than one term. Murmurs of discontent are already audible in Poland and Hungary.

Left and right are imported labels with little explanatory power or relevance to central Europe. To fathom the political dynamics of this region, one must realize that the core countries of central Europe (the Czech Republic, Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Poland) experienced industrial capitalism in the inter-war period. Thus, a political taxonomy based on urbanization and industrialization may prove to be more powerful than the classic left-right dichotomy.

THE RURAL versus THE URBAN

Left and Right in a Divided Europe

The enmity between the urban and the bucolic has deep historical roots. When the teetering Roman Empire fell to the Barbarians (410–476 AD), five centuries of existential insecurity and mayhem ensued. Vassals pledged allegiance and subservience to local lords in return for protection against nomads and marauders. Trading was confined to fortified medieval cities.

Even as it petered out in the west, feudalism remained entrenched in the prolix codices and patents of the Habsburg Austro–Hungarian empire which encompassed central Europe and collapsed only in 1918. Well into the twentieth century, the majority of the denizens of these moribund swathes of the continent worked the land. This feudal legacy of a brobdignagian agricultural sector in, for instance, Poland – now hampers the EU accession talks.

Vassals were little freer than slaves. In comparison, burghers, the inhabitants of the city, were liberated from the bondage of the feudal labour contract. As a result, they were able to acquire private possessions and the city acted as supreme guarantor of their property rights. Urban centers relied on trading and economic might to obtain and secure political autonomy.

John of Paris, arguably one of the first capitalist cities (at least according to Braudel), wrote: "(The individual) had a right to property which was not with impunity to be interfered with by superior authority – because it was acquired by (his) own efforts" (in Georges Duby, "The age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980–1420, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1981). Max Weber, in his opus, "The City" (New York, MacMillan, 1958) wrote optimistically about urbanization: "The medieval citizen was on the way towards becoming an economic man ... the ancient citizen was a political man."

But communism halted this process. It froze the early feudal frame of mind of disdain and derision towards "non–productive", "city–based" vocations. Agricultural and industrial occupations were romantically extolled by communist parties everywhere. The cities were berated as hubs of moral turpitude, decadence and greed. Ironically, avowed anti–communist right wing populists, like Hungary's former prime minister, Orban, sought to propagate these sentiments, to their electoral detriment.

Communism was an urban phenomenon – but it abnegated its "bourgeoisie" pedigree. Private property was replaced by communal ownership. Servitude to the state replaced individualism. Personal mobility was severely curtailed. In communism, feudalism was restored.

Very like the Church in the Middle Ages, communism sought to monopolize and permeate all discourse, all thinking, and all intellectual pursuits. Communism was characterized by tensions between party, state and the economy – exactly as the medieval polity was plagued by conflicts between church, king and merchants–bankers.

In communism, political activism was a precondition for advancement and, too often, for personal survival. John of Salisbury might as well have been writing for a communist agitprop department when he penned this in "Policraticus" (1159 AD): "...if (rich people, people with private property) have been stuffed through excessive greed and if they hold in their contents too obstinately, (they) give rise to countless and incurable illnesses and, through their vices, can bring about the ruin of the body as a whole". The body in the text being the body politic.

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Workers, both industrial and agricultural, were lionized and idolized in communist times. With the implosion of communism, these frustrated and angry rejects of a failed ideology spawned many grassroots political movements, lately in Poland, in the form of "Self Defence". Their envied and despised enemies are the well-educated, the intellectuals, the self-proclaimed new elite, the foreigner, the minority, the rich, and the remote bureaucrat in Brussels.

Like in the West, the hinterland tends to support the right. Orban's Fidesz lost in Budapest in the recent elections – but scored big in villages and farms throughout Hungary. Agrarian and peasant parties abound in all three central European countries and often hold the balance of power in coalition governments.

THE YOUNG and THE NEW versus THE TIRED and THE TRIED

The cult of youth in central Europe was an inevitable outcome of the utter failure of older generations. The allure of the new and the untried often prevailed over the certainty of the tried and failed. Many

senior politicians, managers, entrepreneurs and journalists across this region are in their 20's or 30's.

Yet, the inexperienced temerity of the young has often led to voter disillusionment and disenchantment. Many among the young are too identified with the pratfalls of "reform". Age and experience reassert themselves through the ballot boxes – and with them the disingenuous habits of the past. Many of the "old, safe hands" are former communists disingenuously turned socialists turned democrats turned capitalists. As even revolutionaries age, they become territorial and hidebound. Turf wars are likely to intensify rather than recede.

THE TECHNOCRATS / EXPERTS versus THE LOBBYIST-MANAGERS

Communist managers – always the quintessential rent-seekers – were trained to wheedle politicians, lobby the state and cadge for subsidies and bailouts, rather than respond to market signals. As communism imploded, the involvement of the state in the economy – and the resources it commanded – contracted. Multilateral funds are tightly supervised. Communist-era "directors" – their skills made redundant by these developments – were shockingly and abruptly confronted with merciless market realities.

Predictably they flopped and were supplanted by expert managers and technocrats, more attuned to markets and to profits, and committed to competition and other capitalistic tenets. The decrepit, "privatized" assets of the dying system expropriated by the nomenclature were soon acquired by foreign investors, or shut down. The old guard has decisively lost its capital – both pecuniary and political.

Political parties which relied on these cronies for contributions and influence-peddling – are in decline. Those that had the foresight to detach themselves from the venality and dissipation of "the system" are on the ascendance. From Haiderism to Fortuynism and from Lepper to Medgyessy – being an outsider is a distinct political advantage in both west and east alike.

THE BUREAUCRATS versus THE POLITICIANS

The notion of an a-political civil service and its political – though transient – masters is alien to post communist societies. Every appointment in the public sector, down to the most insignificant sinecure, is still politicized. Yet, the economic decline precipitated by the transition to free markets, forced even the most backward political classes to appoint a cadre of young, foreign educated, well-traveled, dynamic, and open minded bureaucrats.

These are no longer a negligible minority. Nor are they bereft of political assets. Their power and ubiquity increase with every jerky change of government. Their public stature, expertise, and contacts with their foreign counterparts threaten the lugubrious and supernumerary class of professional politicians – many of whom are ashen remnants of the communist conflagration. Hence the recent politically-tainted attempts to curb the powers of central bankers in Poland and the Czech Republic.

THE NATIONALISTS versus THE EUROPEANS

The malignant fringe of far-right nationalism and far left populism in central Europe is more virulent and less sophisticated than its counterparts in Austria, Denmark, Italy, France, or the Netherlands. With the exception of Poland, though, it is on the wane.

Populists of all stripes combine calls for a thinly disguised "strong man" dictatorship with exclusionary racist xenophobia, strong anti-EU sentiments, conspiracy theory streaks of paranoia, the revival of an imaginary rustic and family-centered utopia, fears of unemployment and economic destitution, regionalism and local patriotism.

Though far from the mainstream and often derided and ignored – they succeeded to radicalize both the right and the left in central Europe, as they have done in the west. Thus, mainstream parties were forced to adopt a more assertive foreign policy tinged with ominous nationalism (Hungary) and anti-Europeanism (Poland, Hungary). There has been a measurable shift in public opinion as well – towards disenchantment with EU enlargement and overtly exclusionary nationalism. This was aided by Brussels' lukewarm welcome, discriminatory and protectionist practices, and bureaucratic indecisiveness.

These worrisome tendencies are balanced by the inertia of the process. Politicians of all colors are committed to the European project. Carping aside, the countries of central Europe stand to reap significant economic benefits from their EU membership. Still, the outcome of this clash between parochial nationalism and Europeanism is far from certain and, contrary to received wisdom, the process is reversible.

THE CENTRALISTS versus THE REGIONALISTS

The recent bickering about the Benes decrees proves that the vision of a "Europe of regions" is ephemeral. True, the century old nation state has weakened greatly and the centripetal energy of regions has increased. But this applies only to homogeneous states.

Minorities tend to disrupt this continuity and majorities do their damndest to eradicate these discontinuities by various means – from assimilation (central Europe) to extermination (the Balkan). Hungary's policies – its status law and the economic benefits it bestowed upon expatriate Hungarians – is the epitome of such tendencies.

These axes of tension delineate and form central Europe's political landscape. The Procrustean categories of "left" and "right" do injustice to these subtleties. As central Europe matures into fully functioning capitalistic liberal democracies, proper leftwing parties and their rightwing adversaries are bound to emerge. But this is still in the future.

Sam Vaknin (<http://samvak.tripod.com>) is the author of Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain – How the West Lost the East. He served as a columnist for Central Europe Review, PopMatters, and eBookWeb , and Bellaonline, and as a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent. He is the the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.

Further Expansions Underway at Colours Wheelchairs

By Dr. Gene Emmer

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Colours `N Motion, a leading U.S. manufacturer of innovative and lightweight wheelchairs, announced that it has relocated its operations to a larger facility in Corona, California. This announcement has come only weeks after the announcement of expanded sales operations in Europe.

John Box, President of Colours `N Motion, said: "Colours new production site in Corona is more than twice the size of our previous facility in Anaheim and will enable us to enhance our operations".

In December, Colours announced that it had selected Med Services Europe B.V. to build up its European distribution network. Med Services Europe will be responsible for locating, selecting and managing a distribution network in Western and Eastern Europe. European distributors of quality medical products interested in representing Colours Wheelchairs in their market are encouraged to contact Dr. Emmer, President of Med Services Europe, directly.

About Colours `N Motion

Colours is considered a leader in the rehabilitation industry for its design of innovative everyday, sport and pediatric wheelchairs. Colours' wheelchairs are lightweight, adjustable and customizable. At 14.5 pounds (6.6 kg) the custom–designed Zephyr (http://www.colourswheelchair.com/products/prod_zephyr.htm) is one of the lightest wheelchairs on the market. The Boing! (http://www.colourswheelchair.com/products/prod_boing.htm) is the first wheelchair on the market with four–wheel independent suspension. Colours is disabled owned and operated. For more information: www.ColoursWheelchair.com

About Med Services Europe

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Med Services Europe B.V. is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands and specializes in Sales, Marketing and Business Development services for the Pharmaceutical, Diagnostic and Medical Equipment Industry. Med Services' area of focus is Europe.

For more information: www.MedServicesEurope.com Telephone: +31648566707 (in Amsterdam)

Dr Gene Emmer is President of Med Services Europe. Med Services Europe conducts Business Development for the Pharmaceutical, Diagnostic and Medical Industry.



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