

12-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Toth, Karoly (1994) "Five Years after the Changes. An Assessment of the Situation in Central-Eastern Europe," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol14/iss6/2>

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## **FIVE YEARS AFTER THE CHANGES.**

### **AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE**

**By Karoly Toth**

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This paper will contain five sections. In the first some specific features of Central-Eastern Europe will be pointed out; in the second part the prehistory of the changes of regimes will be sketched; in the third part some common characteristics of the countries concerned will be emphasized; in the fourth part an analysis of the most burning problems of this region (nationalism, digesting the past, theological assessment of the change) will be given; finally, there will be a summary of what Central Europeans can offer to and what we expect from Western Europe, i.e. what are the hopes for the future.

#### **I.**

1. The attempt to describe the political-social as well as ecclesiastical situation in Central-Eastern Europe and to take a measure of the consequences of the radical changes commenced five years ago can only result in a temporary picture. Five years ago there began a profound and far-reaching process which is far from being finished. It has produced changes that are perceptible all over the world and the effects and challenges of which can be of serious consequences for Western Europe. Signs of dissatisfaction with the existing socialism could be seen long ago, but it was five years ago that this process sped up dramatically and assumed revolutionary characteristics. The trends and the outlines of this process were visible, but its final effects are unpredictable.

2. Concentrating on Central-Eastern Europe in this sense, i.e. with a view of its global consequences, we have to keep certain facts in mind.

A. Central-Eastern Europe should not be regarded as a monolithic unit in spite of many

common characteristics of the countries in that region. The area behind the former Iron Curtain is just as multi-colored as Western Europe. The former Soviet Union itself is very problematical; it unquestionably belongs to Eastern Europe but by no means to Central Europe. Central Europe has never been a monolithic unit, not even at the time of the most brutal Stalinism when the fiction of its unity was enforced with arms.

B. By Central-Eastern Europe we do not mean a merely geographical areas, not even a simply cultural community, but those former socialist countries in which, five years ago, the experiment of socialism proved a catastrophic failure. One of the peculiarities of these countries is the conscious or unconscious conviction of their peoples that they do not belong to the East, but, by their culture, they constitute an integral part of Europe formed by Western culture, as distinct from the Eastern form of Christianity (Byzantium, Orthodoxy unaffected by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment). Taken in this sense, Central-Eastern Europe includes the following states: the former German Democratic Republic, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and on the meeting place of the two cultures, Romania as well as the rest of successor states of the former Yugoslavia.

C. However, the concept of Central-Eastern Europe is not clear as yet. In any case, it is hard to draw the borders of Europe. It is obvious where it begins in the West: at the Atlantic Ocean. But where does it end? At the Ural Mountains? At Vladivostok?

A further difficulty is the phraseology describing the Central-Eastern European processes in a way that it should meet the requirements of the West. This means a considerable disadvantage for the region because in this way it appears to be unreliable, incalculable, impenetrable, destabilizing and constantly obliged to be on the defensive, especially at this time of unemployment and economic recession in the West overrun with impoverished refugees from the East and South.

3. I am speaking on the basis of my experiences in Hungary, although I endeavor to stress traits characteristic for the whole of Central Europe. I can do so all the more because my country--as is well known--has and still is a precursor of the reforms in Central-Eastern Europe.

## II.

1. The change in region did not occur without any previous indications but had been preceded by a long period of preparation. Soon after the ideological and economic division of European fissures could be seen on the wall of the socialist camp. I refer to events in chronological order: the uprising of workers in Berlin in June, 1953, the events in Poznan,

Poland, in 1956, soon after the revolution in Hungary, then the Prague Spring in 1968, and since the beginning of the 1980s, repeated unrests in Poland.

2. We have to say clearly that the reforms in the socialist countries were introduced by Communists who had previously believed in the reformability of socialism (e.g. Imre Nagy in Budapest, Alexander Dubcek in Prague, and later Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow). However, since the beginning of the 1980s the hopelessness of reforming socialism, hall-marked by the Soviet Union, became more and more apparent. The way to its demolition was opened by Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* which gave up its claim to hegemony in Central-Eastern Europe. As a matter of fact, this was the decision that revealed the prospects for the reformatory efforts and made the dismantling of the Communist power structure possible.

3. The forces that engaged in pulling down the then existing socialism at the end of the 1980s represented a very broad spectrum from the reform-Communists through intellectuals and liberals to various groups. This meant the collaboration of people with very different views all of whom wanted change and were against dictatorship but had no precise program for the future. Nevertheless, there were two varieties of this trend which worked against the ideology of the atheism and internationalism: religion and nationalism. Both were used as natural weapons against dictatorship which tried to oppress these two big entities. These characteristics of the change in its early period will perhaps explain the contradictions to be experienced later on in Central-Eastern Europe to which we shall return later.

4. The events of the change in 1989-90 cannot be regarded as revolutionary ones in the classic sense of the nineteenth and twentieth century revolutions. That is why Timothy Garston Ash, the well-known English political scientist, coined the word "refolution," the mixture of reform and revolution, for the events in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. These events were not directly influenced by the institutional churches. Their influence was rather indirect, e.g. in the G.D.R. and Poland and through certain individuals. e.g. Rev. László Tökés in Romania. And yet the churches were those exceptional organizations which--in spite of their negation of Marxism by their existence--were tolerated. Whether, in this case, the church can be regarded as a factor of resistance remains a question.

### III.

1. In order to correctly weigh the consequences of changes in Central-Eastern Europe, we must make a few short excursions. We have to remind ourselves of the fact that the nations of this region were, for four hundred years, under the yoke of foreign dominion. Until the end of World War I the Hapsburgs ruled in the West; the East was dominated or menaced by the huge empire of the Tsars, while the South was in the hands of the gradually

weakening Ottoman Empire. The collapse of these powers at the end of World War I did not bring freedom to the peoples of Central-Eastern Europe because in a few years two great ideologies announced their claims: in the West, German Nazism with its anti-rationalism and in the East, Stalin's socialist hyper-rationalism. Thus, Central-Eastern Europe became the exercise-field of these ideologies; that had devastating consequences.

2. By the last decade of the twentieth century, both of these giants disappeared. A new era could begin: a period of real national sovereignty. The nations living here could, in spite of their problems, breathe freely. Many people ask how long will this *kairos* last. It follows from the above that the nations of Central-Eastern Europe know full well that their fate depends--owing to the interdependence of political incidents--to great measure on the development of world politics. They are aware of their inability to influence their future in a decisive way because they are but subordinate pawns on the big chess board of world politics. Perhaps that is why they are so persistently trying to join European organizations at all levels (NATO, European Community, etc.). They hope to find security within the community of the nations of Europe. And they are greatly disappointed by their failure to be permitted to join these organizations so far.

3. Beside these endeavors of theirs are three basic decisions adopted by all nations of the region.

A. They all want to build institutions of a pluralist society, of parliamentary democracy. All nations of Central-Eastern Europe have declared themselves for the democratic standards of a pluralist system of institutions, though they (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) have no traditions in this field. This circumstance led, in the past five years, to a hectic search for a new identity, an effort characterized sometimes by quite anachronistic systems as, e.g., the rehabilitation of certain shady persons of their past (the re-burial of Regent Horthy in Hungary, the Tisso-cult in Slovakia, etc.).

We must not think, however, that the search for ideals in the past is to be condemned in any case; it is objectionable only if history is used to restore the past that God had closed already, instead of trying to understand thereby what God expects from us here and now. This anachronistic search for identity or its rejection respectively is one of the reasons why the reform Communists have become popular again, as demonstrated, e.g., by the recent elections in Hungary.

B. The countries of Central-Eastern Europe have all opted for market economies. In this respect, too, they had some illusions. After the failure of planned economy, they were convinced that its opposite would surely work. But capitalism viewed from afar is very different from what is experienced at close range. Here some naivety also played a part. Those living for forty long years under socialism were unable to comprehend this quite different mechanism, the interaction between politics and economy in capitalism. In

socialism, a political decision was at the same time an economic one too, but in market economy, their relation to each other is much more complicated and indirect. Thus, when Western politicians promised some economic aid, a financial assistance, people brought up in socialism were astonished at the absence of its immediate effects.

4. Market economy was for Central-Eastern Europeans either an abstract concept or an attractive quantity of luxurious products unattainable in socialism. But they did not realize what had made this abundance of goods possible: the hard work and the rational organization of production. It will surely take a long time till the working morale and the mentality of the people brought up in socialism can be adapted to the rules of market economy.

In the last five years it has appeared that there are two kinds of capitalists: the hard-working, thrifty, and enterprising type, and the loathsome, unscrupulous, fraudulent impostors. It has also become obvious that competition in market economy is just as relentless a struggle as the class-struggle was. All these are among the reasons of the disappointment and nostalgia that characterize the political mood in Central-Eastern Europe nowadays.

A third decision has also been made by all nations in Central-Eastern Europe: the observance of human rights (religious liberty and other liberties included) and the condemnation of all kinds of discrimination. This principle seems to be contradicted by conflicts and tensions which have arisen in the last five years (xenophobia, nationalism, anti-semitism); especially ticklish are the relations between those in power and the representatives of the mass media. And yet we can say with a good conscience that the institutions established to insure human rights are functioning well and without any major frictions.

5. Here we have to deal with the question why the neo-Communists have come to power again in some countries in Central-Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Poland and most recently in Hungary). The mass media are fomenting a certain kind of panic in Western Europe, as if "the spirit of the allegedly dead Communism had come back."<sup>1</sup> But we have to state that:

- A. these Communists are not identical with those of fifty years ago;
- B. this new generation of Communists played a key role in the reform movement;
- C. the successors of their former Communists are persistently emphasizing "their adherence to democratic norms, the observance of parliamentary democracy and market economy," as was stated with relief by the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. One need not be afraid of these socialists as they call themselves, because "their power is considerably limited by the

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. the lead article of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung on May 21-22, 1994, "Ghosts in Eastern Europe."

barriers of democratic institutions and the narrow elbow-room of economy."<sup>2</sup> These freely elected leftist governments are dependent on the goodwill of Western Europe.

In this connection one of the defects of the governments elected in 1990 should be pointed out, namely, that their search for a new identity was predominantly of ideological character. This orientation frightened the peoples of Central-Eastern Europe who had been tired of all ideologies and wanted to think and act pragmatically at last.

#### IV.

Three delicate questions need to be dealt with.

1. The first is the harrowing question of the national and ethnic conflicts that have broken out in these last five years. This is a very complicated problem evoked by various causes. Nationalism is namely a conglomerate of very different emotions, ideas, and views, resulting in tragic incidents which are bewildering not only in Western Europe but the whole world. One of its components is surely the centuries-long oppression which has badly injured the national feelings of these peoples. Thus, it is understandable that their nationalism has erupted like a volcano in their newly acquired freedom. Nationalism proved an effective weapon in the fight against socialism, but after its victory it has become like an evil spirit that escaped out of a bottle. Its force has only increased by the fact that it was also resorted to by Communist dictatorships when they felt their nations' growing alienation from socialism. An extreme example was given by Nicolae Ceaucescu who combined his brutal dictatorship with a fanatic nationalism. Unfortunately, further instances could also be provided.

It should be realized that nationalism consists basically of two components. Experts call it a "binary ideology" which has a negative-destructive and, at the same time, a positive-constructive side. It depends on the concrete circumstances, which of the two prevails. And it is often forgotten that, in the nineteenth century which is considered the starting period of modern nationalism, there was in Europe another tradition which, already then tried to overcome nationalism in the name of Christian universalism. Novalis, e.g., wrote a work published in 1799 (Christianity of Europe) about the "formidable madness besetting the nations."

The ethnic conflicts and the problem of nationalism have raised a very difficult, almost unsolvable, dilemma for the churches of Central-Eastern Europe. It can be felt especially in the case of minority churches and ethnic groups but can also be observed in great churches living in areas afflicted by civil wars (in the former Yugoslavia and in the successor states

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

of the Soviet Union: Azerbaijan, Georgia). The churches' dilemma is that they have to decide whether they will take upon themselves to become the instruments of fanatic nationalism, further deepening thereby the conflicts, or try, in the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that they will be accused of unpatriotism and rejected by the fanatically nationalistic ethnic groups.

But we Christians should never get tired of emphasizing that Christian theology makes no qualitative distinction among nations. The differences between them are contextual: geographical, historical, and cultural differences which, from Christian point of view, are only of relative significance. That means the churches' point of view in judging a nation must always be a theological one. We always have to make a distinction between political objectives, programs, and sentiments from a theological angle. Nationality should not be a Christian attribute of a church. The national character only indicates the place where a certain member of the Church Universal lives and bears witness to his or her Lord. In other words, nationalism must always remain a cultural category; it must never serve political ends; it should only express the specific mentality of a nation enriching thereby the many colored spirituality of the world community. Practically speaking many people live in national (and denominational) churches; national episcopal conferences have of late gained more and more importance in the Roman Catholic Church too. Commitment to one's own nation can enrich the churches. On the other hand, nowadays we have every reason to be afraid of nationalism. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the church is the one people of God made of all the nations. But our contribution to overcoming a dangerous nationalism unworthy of any credit should not be some new sort of internationalism, rather a creative reciprocity which discovers the spiritual treasures of the sister churches.

There is an important lesson to be learned by the nations of Central-Eastern Europe from those of the West. Western economy is due, among other things, to the change of thinking there after World War II. Those nations (e.g. the Germans and the French) were able to abandon their traditional hostilities and to cooperate in reconciliation. In this historic process we do not have to do with the denial of their national identity, but with such a radical change of mentality whereby they no longer regard their nationality as a weapon against other nations. The nations of Central-Eastern Europe have, however, used their newly-won liberty after the collapse of the Communist system for redressing their old historic grievances. Thus, their freedom is turned, in a persuasive way, against one another.

Now, there are two political trends prevalent in Central-Eastern Europe: intolerant nationalism on the one hand, and the endeavor to bring about reconciliation among nation (in the name of European civilization) on the other. The latter considers the national character culturally and does not use it as a political weapon. If the nations of Central-Eastern Europe want to join the European community, they have to realize that they, too,



must be reconciled with one another. "If they are unable to do so, they automatically exclude themselves from Europe," says W. Plaff, a distinguished American journalist.<sup>3</sup>

2. Another very complicated problem engrossing public opinion in Central-Eastern Europe during the five years since the change of regimes is how to assess their recent past.

A. On the one hand, there was no open or official, and even less scientific program which could honestly deal with this question after the past forty-five years. Instead, the change was accompanied by the usual confusion arising in the wake of all political turn-overs and agitated by turbulent emotions. On the other hand, the decidedly peaceful character of the change evoked a strong clash of emotions in which hatred, wrath, revenge, the desire of retaliation were mixed. This very poisonous amalgam can hardly be described objectively, but it surely has serious warning signs in it.

B. There are some for whom the change has proved an excellent opportunity to realize their personal and egotistic ambitions. At once we were inundated with "oppressed and persecuted" people who announced their claims to amends. At the same time we also have to say that the real victims of the overthrown regime behaved modestly and generally dispensed with any reparation. Most of them were even ousted from publicity. A certain kind of scapegoat reflex got the mastery of the population, but it could be considered one form of conscious or subconscious sense of guilt as well as a wish of purification. In this connection the right word was said by President Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia: "Somehow or other we were all involved in the functioning of that system."

C. The specific character of the change was also determined by a symptom which might have its origin in the history of the region. This is the psychological effect of frequent changes in the political situation. In the present century alone, political systems alone have so often changed in Central-Eastern Europe as nowhere else in Western Europe. This has produced a type of person, the cynical opportunist, who, for the sake of mere survival, can and will adapt himself to the most contrary circumstances. A collective expression of this behavior is: "We shall worship tomorrow what we burn today, and what we adore today we shall burn tomorrow." It will take a long time to overcome this moral distortion.

3. The churches have experienced the change in the policy of the state with regard to them as a miracle. While for forty years they lived (to say the least) under unfriendly governments, they were surprised to find that the freely elected government felt itself bound to rehabilitate and compensate the churches.

A. It is, however, not quite clear what the churches really want: restoration of the former situation (the *status quo ante*) or renewal on the basis of serious theological reflections. Would they return to the system of the people's church ("*Volkskirche*") and to continue where

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<sup>3</sup>"East Europeans Have an Adjustment to Make" International Herald Tribune, May 21-22, 1994.

they left off forty-five years ago, or do they wish to build up something new? At some places there is the temptation of the vision of the *corpus Christianum* or even of the idea of Neo-Constantinianism. But the churches had soon to realize that the restitution of their former institutions did not mean that they could win back their alienated believers. (In Hungary, the government elected after the change of regime, regulated in law, the restitution of former ecclesiastical institutions. Church schools, e.g., must be returned to the church within ten years. In other countries other rules are in force.) Through these institutions, the churches can reach a great number of people who are not regular church-goers. And churches are also given considerable financial aid in order that they can make these institutions function. This, however, raises another problem. The newly opened possibilities require so much of the churches' energies that they will overlook their real task: the preaching of God's Word and the pastoral care of their believers.

B. The great historical churches also have to take notice of the fact that, within a pluralist society, they are just one group among many others, and that they cannot live by their privileges in the long run; they must rely on the faith of their members, as at the time of socialism. They have to take notice of the circumstance that faith is no longer supported by a general consensus. Furthermore, the appearance and spread of various sects and new religions constitute a great challenge for the churches of Central-Eastern Europe. The interest in religion has considerably grown in this region, but a great many people are drawn to new religious experiments, and this can result in decreasing of churchliness. This is more so as the historic churches are, as former so called collaborators with the socialist regime, regarded by certain groups of society with suspicion.

C. All these dangers should not be made light of. For the reasons enumerated above, the churches--like the Biblical Martha--"are careful and troubled about many things" which can all be necessary indeed. They should not forget, however, the *anum necessarium*, the "one needful thing" (Luke 10, 42), the essential thing, namely that they are ordained to be the shepherds and prophets of their people and that they must under all circumstances be engaged in performing the duty arising from that obligation. One of the greatest challenges the churches are faced with today is where they are able to avoid such triumphalism that would alienate people from them even more.

D. The theological dealing with the changes--if there is such an engagement at all--is very one-sided. The past is summarily disowned and rejected without any analysis and can unequivocally be regarded as opportunism. It is high time that we should give a theological answer to our past. But this should be done as a real task of theology and not simply as an opportunistic antithesis of all theological reflections that were considered "official theology" in the forty years of socialism. It would be a great mistake to replace the quasi theological

thinking of yesterday with another "quasi theology" of today. We should avoid any new manipulation with theological values.

## V.

Having sketched above a general picture of Central-Eastern Europe, let us now try to weigh the situation and to sum up our findings.

1. One might have the impression that there are contrary trends in the Central-Eastern and Western part of Europe: an increasing integration in the West and the multiplying signs of disintegration in Mid-East. The stages of West-European integration are well known (Common Market, Maastricht Agreement, European Community, all leading to European Union).

2. At the same time, the symptoms of disintegration, of separation are multiplying in Eastern Europe. Here we have to do not only with the former federal states (Yugoslavia, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia) falling apart but also with the tragic civil wars which further parcel up the successor states. Another question raised by the most recent events with special sharpness is whether the gulf between Western and Eastern Europe will not be deepened by the fact that, while in Western Europe the conservative forces get into power. In Eastern Europe the neo-Communists have won in the elections, offering some sort of post-socialism as a consolation to the disappointed and impoverished population of the region. A further unhappy feature of the situation in Central-Eastern Europe is that its nations are not getting closer to one another; they are not endeavouring to have a better knowledge of one another's language and culture; they are rather competing for the favor of Western Europe.

3. The churches of Central-Eastern Europe can, in spite of all their problems and difficulties, make an important contribution to the development of the European Community. It would be worthwhile to examine how the Christians of the region could withstand militant atheism and survive socialism. Their experiences prove that real strength does not consist in great institutions and that the church can only be saved by God's grace and the faith of her members. This does not mean that the church has no need of institutions. But we have understood what is the "power in infirmities" (II Cor. 12:9). How could the churches of Central-Eastern Europe bear witness of their experience to the rest of Europe in a way that it should not look like *hubris* or presumption? There are namely some who think that the impulse for ecclesiastical renewal in Europe can be expected from the Eastern part of the continent where the churches were purified in the fire of persecutions. Those who are of this opinion emphasize the importance of one's personal commitment in faith without which no revival is possible. In order that our churches can impart these experiences to other European churches, they should first reflect on them together in an ecumenical spirit.

The churches of Central-Eastern Europe have also learned how to appreciate ecumenical solidarity. The fact that they could always feel to be an integral part of the Church Universal meant a great encouragement to them, not mention the considerable aid they were given in so many ways by the churches of Western Europe and North America.

4. It will take a long time until the nations of Central-Eastern Europe acquire the working morale necessary for market economy and the technology of the organization of work. They should learn these things as soon as possible. On the other hand, Europe need not be afraid of the recent events in Central-Eastern Europe, e.g., the result of the elections in Hungary. I am convinced that socialism of the Stalinist type will never return, but a productive society that is also mindful of justice will by and by be crystallized.

5. In conclusion, we must learn ecumenism together, in a way that we should never forget: Europe is for us, Christians, too big and too small at the same time. Too small, because the Christians' home is the Oikoumene, the whole inhabited world and not merely the European house. Too big, because it is the local congregation, our community of faith, and not the bureaucratic organizations, where Christian faith can become reality. The ethics of co-existence must be jointly formed by all nations and churches of Europe, and it must be based on the best traditions of the continent. But this can only be accomplished if we jointly get over nationalism and denominationalism which are likewise European traditions. In such a way can the churches of East and West, North and South, and, of course, of Central-Eastern Europe as well, be the actual makers of the All-European community.