

MITTELEUROPA: REBIRTH OF AN IDEA

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"*Mittleuropa*", said Erhard Busek in 1986 "helps people at Europe's geographical cut-off points to live a little better, it helps them to develop more human forms of existence despite power-political realities". Erhard Busek, a cabinet minister in the present Austrian government, was not just anybody. In January of this year, Vaclav Havel told the Polish Sejm that there was not "a real historic opportunity to fill with something meaningful the great political vacuum that arose in Central Europe after the breakup of the Habsburg Empire". And now after his long years in the wilderness Vaclav Havel is not just anybody either.

The idea of *Mittleuropa* is of unpromising historical provenance, to say the least. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and especially after 1871, *Mittleuropa*, the idea of a German dominated and economically cohesive central Europe became primarily a rallying cry for *Grossdeutsch* Austrians excluded by Bismark from the newly unified Germany. Though the idea attracted powerful support in both its hegemonic and non-hegemonic variations, there was a definite emphasis on the German diaspora as the constitutive element of central and south-eastern central Europe. By the time the German social-liberal Friedrich Naumann published his often misunderstood *Mittleuropa* in 1915, the idea was meeting implacable opposition among Slavs, especially the Czechs under T.G. Masaryk. After World War I, Versailles left substantial German minorities in the successor states causing *Mittleuropa* theories, now more than ever with inescapable racial overtones, to run riot.

After 1945, the idea lay dormant, largely confined to weather forecasts or occasionally creeping into geography textbooks. In the early 1980s, however, there was a seemingly inexplicable *Mittleuropa* renaissance. In free Europe the emphasis was political and centred either on Austrian federal conservatives or upon the growingly anti-American Greens and the left-wing of the SPD, who stove for a "finlandisation" of central Europe, much to the alarm of the Western Allies and the West German establishment. Inside the Eastern Block, on the other hand, the *Mittleuropa* idea, which involved the rediscovery of a common literary heritage and lifestyle in the face of grey communist authoritarianism, was almost exclusively cultural and Utopian: a sort of "anti-politics" as, George Konrad, one of its exponents, called it.

Until recently opponents of *Mittleuropa* could simply point crushingly to the objective facts of the east-west divide. In 1986, Francois Bondy, like most Frenchmen ever wary of German entanglements in the east, called it a "ghost", ein *Gespenst*. *Mittleuropa* was deemed to be both unrealistic and destabilising, indeed its very attraction, as Mihaly Vajda has pointed out, lay in the subversion of the status quo. However, as the gentle Barbarossa, speaking in territorial terms, or the greatest Auto-da-fe in history,

speaking in ideological terms, is acted out in the east, such arguments no longer convince. As in the 1860s after the Crimean War, Russia is staggering out of the state system, setting the scene for creative political action in the centre. In central Europe the foreign political constellation has always been decisive. To adapt one of Bismark's dictums to Gorbachev's vision, one first will have to ensure that the Common European Home has a secure roof before we go about the more congenial task of furnishing it. At present it still seems likely that no satisfactory common roof will be found and that Europeans will continue to live in several houses.

This means that a united Germany, or certainly its western half, must remain in NATO. *Reich* or Federal Germans, then will not be part of *Mittleuropa*, thus removing most of the economic incentive but also the main psychological abjection to closer central European political cooperation. But is there a *Mittleuropa* without the Germans? That is one of the questions that central European politicians must face today. Is a *Mittleuropa* without German economic participation desirable or even feasible? Philosopher Mihaly Vajda thinks not. But how will the smaller nations react to the imminent return of the Germans? The conservative German idea of *Mittleuropa* has gained a certain currency in the Federal Republic especially among right-wing political scientists and historians such as Bernard Willms and Helmut Diwald. They suggest a *Mittleuropa* centred on Prague, Berlin and Vienna. It does not take too much imagination to deduce where the balance of power in such a construction would lie. However benevolent German intentions, their actions are likely to be interpreted in the worst possible way. Typical would be the reaction of Henry Cord Meyer, himself the author of an authoritative book on the subject, to the revival of *Mittleuropa* ideas last December:

"Embracing *Mittleuropa* is like jumping out of the Communist frying pan into the German fire. *Mittleuropa* is Central Europe under a special regime. It is German. It was lethal 50 years ago. It might be either again."

Mittleuropa is certainly no longer a ghost. Even the sober British business magazine *Economist* has acknowledged the re-emergence of the *Mittleuropa* "tune". However, both Western security considerations and historic scars in the area would appear to exclude Germany. This leaves essentially the successor states of the old Habsburg empire, to whom we must now turn.

In Hungary it is difficult to overlook the widespread if unrealistic belief of the need for new supra-national ties and a genuine nostalgia for the imperial past. The popularity of Otto v. Habsburg in some circles is a good example. Not surprisingly Hungarian liberals are sceptical, but anyone inclined to ridicule restorative tendencies out of hand should consider the panic produced among Romania's Salvation Front by the threatened return of "King" Michael. They should also ponder developments in Croatia, where statues of Ban Jellacic, scourge of the Hungarians in 1848 and Habsburg loyalist, are going back up.

But nostalgia aside, what might the Habsburgs, or any other federal *Mittleuropa* solution, have to offer? An amelioration of the nationalities problem,

for example. While it is true that between them, Stalin and Hitler, as one commentator put it, transformed the ethnic map of Europe from a patchwork Kokoschka into a more streamlined Modigliani, serious ethnic tensions, obscured by the postliberation euphoria of the old year, have resurfaced with a vengeance. The obvious example just now is Transylvania but in tottering Yugoslavia the end of ideology also requires recourse to new, or perhaps old, integrating concepts. In the words of the Hungarian daily "Magyar Hírlap": "The *Mittleuropa* problem exists: the reconciliation of the people living in the area is a question of primary importance". If the year 1989 was about revolutions, the year 1990 will be about the reassertion of the primacy of the nation and the problem of its minorities. With the increasing flood of Transylvanian refugees and renewed harassment of the minority in the Slovakian Kosice region, the problem of the good 4 million Hungarians living beyond the borders will absorb much of the new government's attention.

It may childish to think in terms of *Mittleuropa*, and more infantile still to hope for a return of the Habsburgs. But I think that the very fact that the Hungarian government is pursuing the question of a minorities Charta, that Vaclav Havel is addressing himself to the vacuum left by the Habsburgs is significant in itself. Eighty years ago neither would probably have thought on those lines: it was after all Czech separatism and Magyar intransigence which helped to bring the empire down.

And yet it need not have ended in that way. If I were to choose a historic *Mittleuropa* programme with validity for today it would be the Austroslavism of the Czech revivalist Palacky. In the early stages of 1848, Palacky put forward a reorganised Habsburg empire as a federation of free peoples under a single monarchy. Only the Habsburgs could guarantee a central Europe neither Russian nor German. The tragedy of the monarchy was that it never made this transition to a free federation, though it must be added that it was in the interests of nationalist extremists, not least the assassins of Sarajewo, that it should not.

Now it is true that Palacky's idea was born of weakness: the monarchy should provide, what they could not extort by force: since the idea would have to imposed by force on the Hungarian gentry the deal held little attractions for the hard-pressed monarchy of the time. Once they were able to offer force, as later with Masaryk, the idea lost its attraction and the Czechs went for complete independence.

Today we have a sadder and a wiser central Europe. Perhaps the most significant development since 1945 has been a gradual learning process that the old empire, far from being simply a doomed prison of national aspirations, actually enabled diverse ethnic groups to live together in relative harmony for hundreds of years. This is not of course to minimise the enormous tensions and injustices which eventually tore the empire apart. Karl Kraus once called the old empire a *Versuchssation fuer Weltuntergaenge*- a "trial laboratory for ends of the world". In

fact that would be a more accurate description for what followed: chauvinist hysteria, anti-semitism and misconceived economic autarchy schemes in the successor states. National problems were not solved but exacerbated, and the supposedly “unnatural” Habsburg empire was replaced by weirder constructions such as Yugoslavia, emasculated “historic” states such as Hungary, and entities of dubious homogeneity such as Czechoslovakia.

Of course nobody is talking about bringing back the Habsburgs, though for some the argument is seductive: to return to Vaclav Havel, what better way of filling the vacuum left by the departure of the Habsburgs, than with the Habsburgs themselves? What has been learnt, however, is that separate national states are not the answer, that central Europeans must want to live together and that a larger federation with supra-national powers may be the only solution to the ethnic crises of today. At the soonest possible date a united *Mitteleuropa* could negotiate its entry en bloc to a united Europe.

But whatever the solution to the problem of *Mitteleuropa*, be it an unlikely restoration or a new departure, one thing is clear: the centre of Europe, to adapt the words of *Mitteleuropa* protagonist Karl Schloegel, now lies eastwards.