

Collective Images of the West in Postcommunist Countries and the Process of Enlargement of Community Space

Artan Fuga

On fascination and resistance

The fall of the Communist regimes in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and their commitment to social, political and economic reform, represent two aspects of a deep process of social transformation. As in all socio-political transformation which overturns the previous political and economic order, this process needed to develop an ideology and a concrete image of the future in order to mobilize their populations, to invent that certain political rationality which is indispensable for bringing reform to a successful conclusion, and to produce a certain coherence in the changes which occurred in the various fields of life in society. Unlike the preceding revolutions which had gradually nourished hopes for a better life and had expanded the horizons of human possibility with difficulty, movements towards democracy in the former Communist countries found an almost ready-made model.

That social image which nourished all their hopes and structured all their efforts and political actions towards the future was, and continues to be, that of the West. The first slogans launched against the regimes in the countries of the East and the main values which inspired the reforms of post-Communist transition put the West at the centre of all demands and developments. Market economy, a legally constituted state, freedom of expression and respect for the rights of the individual, etc., were considered to be the fundamental values of Western civilization and the central orientation of the process of post-Communist transformation. Consequently, the internal evolution of Communist societies should quite naturally be associated with an immediate restructuring of international relations making possible the creation of a 'common European family', constructed either through the integration of the countries of the East in the political institutions of Europe, or through a gradual process of enlarging the European Community.

The adoption of an already developed model made post-Communist transformation easier. However, the relatively abstract and theoretical aspect of this image fostered illusions about the rhythm of transformation, the material advantages of transition and the intensity of the evolution of human progress. The abstract nature of the image of the West, sublimated and dreamed about, has subsequently been a source of disappointment in the face of the practical difficulties of implementation, despite the positive role which it has played in the first steps towards transition. In spite of the current desire on the part of the population and the political elites to make progress towards transformation to a Western

social model and European integration, this historic movement in the countries of the East has been brought about through multiple tensions and resistance which accompany every process of achieving grand human designs. The building site of a democratic Europe, rich and prosperous, with strong social cohesion, and including all the countries of the continent, is a project which is both liberating and very complex. As such, it cannot but be aware, simultaneously, of the impetus and resistance that all other human successes have known. The paradox lies in the fact that at the beginning of the post-Communist reforms, there was less resistance and it was weaker. But, at the moment when the Western model was actually applied and European integration drew nearer, resistance and counter-trends developed at the heart of the societies of the countries of the East. It is evident that these occurrences have not hindered development towards the socio-political objectives established since the beginning of post-Communist transition. Election results in the countries of the east for the most part showed that anti-European movements, or movements hostile to the process of Westernization at the heart of national public opinion, are now weaker and more marginal in comparison with the pro-European orientation of the electorate and the local political class. However, they tend to spread proportionally as the reforms move the countries of the East closer to the European Community.

While a detailed analysis of these events is not possible in this article, I want to highlight the broad brushstrokes of the problem, that is to say, to look at the West from a distance, from the outside, and above all from the perspective of the mass of those socially and politically involved in resisting the reforms of Westernization and the integration of the countries of the East into Europe.

A common point of departure, but different expectations

It is evident that the peoples of the Western countries and those who live in the countries of the East share identical fundamental values. They want peace, democratization of relations between states on the continent, construction of a political zone of tolerance, respect for democratic rights and a fairer society, economically speaking. Indeed, without this collection of common values underpinning the structure of public opinion in post-Communist and Western societies, political action within the Community by the intellectual and political elite of the two European zones could not remain mobilized for long. For the peoples of the two Europes, particularly during the 20th century, have neither known the same history, nor shared the same social experiences, nor gone down the same institutional route. Consequently, apart from common projects, they have developed different strategies and are seeking to achieve certain goals which also create a certain discrepancy between them. The European Community project is viewed differently by the various sectors of the population living in the East and the West. These two viewpoints illuminate two different facets of the same object.

Jacques Delors, the politician who has marked the process of European construction for years, has clearly set out Western expectations with regard to this process, which has been going on for several decades, based on Europe's historical past. He has put forward three 'demands' which, he says, make the process of European construction imperative for the West. 'The first demand was thus a demand for peace. Peace has never been a benefit which could be permanently acquired ...' As far as the second demand is

concerned, I should like to quote Jean Monet's words from 5 August 1943: 'The countries of Europe have subscribed to a single-minded desire to ensure for their peoples the prosperity that conditions make possible and, consequently necessary; they need larger markets . . .' And finally, a demand for survival: 'we are all suffering from that, from a Europe which has been unable to do anything in Rwanda and Burundi, even though they is almost its back-yard, from a Europe which has provided 70% of the humanitarian aid in Yugoslavia and the bulk of the troops there, without necessarily being able to make progress on a political solution to the problem'.¹

These Western interests correspond in the long term with those of the peoples living in the countries of Eastern Europe. But their immediate problems also provide an important characteristic which introduces relative divisions between the political actions undertaken in the two zone. The people of the countries of the East acknowledge the contribution of the West to lasting peace in our continent. Besides, during the Second World War, just to mention one single instance, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe suffered particularly from the military strategies of Nazi and Fascist totalitarian powers. Afterwards, the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West weighed heavily on the countries of Eastern Europe who lived under the domination of Soviet power and the local Communist elites. Thus, the first 'demand' made by Jacques Delors is shared by the peoples living in Eastern Europe. But as far as the second and third 'demands' are concerned, the situation appears to be different. At the moment the countries of the East do not have an active policy which is widespread in the world. Consequently, though military, diplomatic and humanitarian action on the part of the European Community is always acknowledged by the political elites of the East, it remains something which does not affect them directly. They have other worries.

The enlargement of Western markets as an essential 'demand' for the European Community is of direct interest to the countries of the East, but for another reason. Europe is trying to find markets in the countries of the East in which to sell its goods and invest its capital, whilst the local populations want to satisfy their needs for goods and to find work. There is a great deal of interest on both sides, but this interest can lead to conflict between the buyers and the sellers. Western businessmen who want to benefit from a cheap work force make every effort to exert pressure on salaries. Western investments in the countries of the East have been associated with strong restructuring of the local work force which has reduced the number of jobs considerably. Buy-outs of high-performance local industries and of part of the services infrastructure by large multi-national firms has deprived local businessmen of part of the economic heritage of their country.

For a long time a large part of the population of the countries of the East has cherished the hope that change in the political regime would be rapidly accompanied by an appreciable improvement in their standard of living. Their relative poverty and media hype by the consumer society had created the illusion that the fall of Communism would bring an abundance of the means of consumption. The feeling that this abundance could come about without of prolonged effort and hard work in the fields of manufacturing and services is widespread. People want to work less and earn more. Adam Michnik succinctly expressed this illusion, which is extremely widespread in the countries of the East: 'Prosperity, for workers who have lived all their lives under Communism, means having all the guarantees which existed under that regime, but even more and even better. To use a metaphor, for them, the ideal is an economy in which they would earn as much as the

Americans, benefit from the same social security system as the Swedes and work as they have always worked in Poland'.²

The 'impossible' return to Europe

The political and intellectual elites of the countries of Eastern Europe have often thought of the opening-up of their society to the West as a way of returning to Europe. With this idea, they wanted to show that the process of Westernization characteristic of the period of post-Communist transition was not an accident of history or a chance event caused by the collapse of the former regime. On the contrary, it was the history of their country during the four or five decades that Communist regimes existed which has been considered to be a paradoxical aberration of history, an isolation of the countries of the East, and their natural pan-European homeland, and a political attempt to smash the basic values common to all European societies in the countries of the East. The idea of returning to Europe has not developed just in the countries of Central Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, etc. These societies had more arguments for defending the idea of their return to Europe because they have always had strong Catholic traditions, they were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which possessed a certain European dimension, and they were also highly industrialized countries, linked economically and culturally to the countries of Western Europe before the Second World War.

Paradoxically, the idea of a return to Europe is even stronger and more pressing in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The politicians and the intellectuals in these countries have put forward the idea that this part of Europe has been separated from Western Europe for much longer. Their isolation has not been simply a political fact linked to the Communist history of these countries. It dates from longer ago and characterizes the administrative, political and cultural integration of that area into the Ottoman Empire. The process of Islamization, which has affected parts of countries such as Bulgaria, Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania, is considered rather as a cultural and religious barrier which has separated the two Europes into two culturally distinct areas. These latter societies, once they have entered the socio-political framework of opening-up to the West and taken part in the reforms of post-Communist restructuring, have gone back to a pan-European policy which characterized their history before the Ottoman occupation. History is presented as though it were taking a direction which would lead these societies towards a situation which had existed before, as though it were returning to an origin which was long ago denied and forgotten. In an imaginary way, return to Europe therefore becomes a process which is more heroic and more difficult for those countries which find themselves culturally, geographically and politically further away from the West.

One question has to be asked: why do we say that this return to Europe is impossible? One argument for this is given by the Czech president, Václav Havel, when he says that this return to Europe is not just a rapprochement with the Europe of the past, of the period before the fall of Communism and the Cold War. Europe itself has changed radically with the opening-up and the process of democratization in the former post-Communist countries. Havel writes: 'The task which presents itself now to the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs and the Slovaks is provisionally called: The return to Europe'. As my friend the Czech philosopher Ladislav Hejdíánek has remarked at the colloquium,

Ethics and Politics, which took place recently in Bratislava, this expression is not accurate. We all know that the word 'return' means 'going backwards', whilst, for us, the important thing is to go forwards. From a practical point of view – or political, if you prefer – that means that we do not want to, and we cannot, return to the Europe of the preceding decades, a Europe mercilessly divided by a wall into two opposing blocs. If we want, as we say, to return to Europe, this Europe has to be completely different from the one which we knew until just recently. In other words, thinking about our return means for us thinking about Europe as a whole, thinking about the Europe of the future.³

This 'return' to Europe has taken on a rather paradoxical sense. It has been experienced as a structural return towards the former Communist period in the countries of the East. For behind this transformation are to be found specific social and socio-political activists. More particularly, during the first phase of transition, the former socio-political activists of the period of the 1930s, or their descendants, once more entered the political life of these countries. Those involved were members of nationalist political parties, political groupings of small property owners, various rural groups, and agrarian and royalist parties which had traditionally led a local political life. They reappeared on the political scene, often weighed down with the burden of their former ideological traditions. Through them, the former narrow nationalism emerged to make national relations in the region particularly contentious. Sometimes there were nostalgic individuals who boasted about the old-fashioned local political traditions which did not meet the democratic standards of modern political culture. Some Bosnian politicians held a rather Islamic conception of State institutions and of the legal system. In Romania, the xenophobic and racist extreme right gained good results in the last presidential electoral campaign. Several leaders of Serbian paramilitary troops who acted under the orders of Milosevic's regime during the war in Kosovo glorified the values of pan-Slavism as a system of civilization instead of the Western political and cultural system. In Poland, as several Polish intellectuals have clearly showed, a rather conservative Catholic tradition in some religious circles has always had a tendency to identify being Polish with Catholicism, which is translated by a rather less than friendly attitude towards the Jews. The area of the Balkans, and particularly that of the former Yugoslavia, has for a long time been torn apart by territorial and national conflicts. The Croats and the Serbs, the Bosnians, the Serbs and the Croats, the Albanians and the Serbs, the Serbs and the Montenegrins, the Albanians and the Macedonians, etc., have fought violently amongst themselves throughout the last decade over territories and political areas. Western countries mobilized into action by the UN and NATO have intervened several times, militarily and diplomatically, to find a way out of the serious political crises which have crossed the region and to stop the practice of genocide against national minorities. Despite the positive effects of Western action in the former Yugoslavia, its objectives have been used for nationalist and anti-Western ends by the local media. All intervention in favour of an ethnic group, or a minority national group, or a nation, has provoked hostile feelings towards this Western action and the policies of the European Community amongst members of the rival national groups. Thus, the present wars and conflicts, whatever their original aim, further lengthen the odds against the peoples living in the unstable regions, politically speaking, integrating themselves into the present pan-European dynamic.

Consequently, the notion of this return to Europe is doubly incorrect. First of all because, as President Havel said, the desire of the countries of the East to become integrated

into Europe has not been motivated by nostalgia for the Europe of the Cold War and its division into two camps. And secondly, because European integration cannot take on the appearance of an action carried out by the former traditional nationalist political forces, sometimes with a racist and xenophobic tendency.

The price of economic restructuring

Post-Communist transition in the countries of the East has required a profound reform of all levels of social life. In the economy, it meant undertaking a process of privatization which was to put an end to the former state economy managed by State bureaucracy. Then it was essential to liberalize trade and bring about the monetarization of economic relations by bringing credit mechanisms into play. All these transformations continue to be quite difficult and painful for the majority of the population. A large part of national industry was unable to break free from the framework of its socialist functioning. It was already obsolete and could not respond to the demands of a market economy and international competition. The opening-up of local markets was accompanied by a large influx of goods from abroad which replaced goods in the national economy. The arms industry had to reduce its production and its demands on the national market considerably. The reduction of the importance of this industry in the framework of the national economy resulted in the mass lay-off of employees in that sector who, consequently, found themselves unemployed.

The crisis also affected the agricultural and service sectors. In Poland, a crisis in agriculture was avoided because the economic restructuring had the advantage of having an agricultural sector which was largely based on private property. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, privatization of agriculture did not affect all large areas of arable land. In several cases, the transformation of former agricultural co-operatives into private companies, managed jointly by farmers who had become shareholders or by a management made up of individuals with a majority stake in the total share of the capital which formed the financial basis of the company, has been noted. On the other hand, in several other countries, post-Communist agrarian reforms have divided agricultural land considerably by creating an agricultural system based on innumerable little plots of land. Agriculture has become a domestic activity. Yields from agricultural crops have decreased substantially. Important crops such as tobacco, soya beans, sugar beet, wheat, etc., which in the past supplied the food processing industry, have suffered a drastic reduction in production. Post-Communist agriculture no longer needed a work force which had been artificially protected in the former agricultural co-operatives. Unemployment in rural areas affected hundreds of thousands of people and, more particularly, young people. They have demonstrated their desire to leave rural areas and move to the towns. Secret and illegal emigration to the West became one of the demographic characteristics of that period.

Economic restructuring was a necessary condition for the functioning of the national economy of each country under the new conditions of market economy. This was followed by a difficult period for the vast majority of the population which had to pay the price of change. Sometimes, instead of adopting a realistic method which would have helped them to experience the situation objectively, the peoples asked and expected the

West to pour as much money as possible into the ex-Socialist economies which were in ruins. They dreamed of a new 'Marshall Plan'. When they realized that this was not forthcoming, some sectors of the population realigned themselves with the ex-Communist parties or adopted a nationalism aimed at all things foreign, Western and European as the elements which they imagined to be essential for the enlargement of the area of the Community.

Representatives of the local political and intellectual elites had to try to explain to their compatriots that the post-Communist transition could not depend on a 'Marshall Plan' which would pay out money to turn around an economy which first of all needed restructuring reforms. The philosopher Jeliou Jeleu, the former Bulgarian president from 1992–1997, showed this mentality which remains prevalent in some of the countries of the East: 'After 1989, the mood favoured systematically repeating the refrain of the development of a new "Marshall Plan" for Eastern Europe according to which, after the collapse of Communism, the West would have to pay out colossal sums in order to turn around the economy of post-Communist countries. Some people even thought sanctimoniously that it was never too late to make this gesture . . . This misguided good idea does not have any basis in reality! The Marshall Plan was intended to put Europe back on its feet after it had been ravaged by the Second World War, to rebuild towns and villages which had been reduced to dust, to rebuild factories and communications infrastructures, not to facilitate transition to a market economy. In 1989, the situation in our countries was quite different. Nothing had been razed to the ground, neither towns nor villages, businesses nor factories, roads nor railways. Everything was intact, but nothing was working properly, not even the industries which benefited from the most modern technology! The causes were not a shortage of money (although there is never enough money), but lack of motivation on the part of the people to produce and to improve the techniques of production. All that was due to incorrect, rather than unidentified, connections to property'.⁴

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Restructuring of the socio-political space in the real world and reconfiguration of political territories depend on several factors in the socio-political, economic and cultural order. The direction and the speed of the process of European enlargement with respect to former Communist countries are also a function of this collection of factors. It is the latter which determine its success, its speed and its extent. In the area of Eastern Europe, these factors do not work in a homogeneous way, but obey a varied and fragmented dynamic according to the conditions pertaining in each country.

In any case, the imagined element is also part of a whole range of factors which influence the process of enlargement of the community in Europe. The image which public opinion in the countries of Eastern Europe has of the West is now playing an important role, perhaps the biggest, as far as the political orientation of these countries towards the European Community is concerned. The image of the West, like any construct of the collective imagination, has been developed as a function of several factors which are psychological, social linked to propaganda, connected with the media, etc. Only a knowledge of these factors will allow the construction of a strategy adapted to the real conditions of life, to the needs of the majority and to the collective mentality of the populations which live within the countries of the East. The two meanings of the process of the community space must always be taken into account. This process represents a

tendency towards enlargement on the part the European Community and the West in respect of former Communist countries. But it also has a second dimension, which is sometimes forgotten and neglected: this spirit of opening-up, inherent in the peoples living in the east of Europe with regard to the West. This second factor is not automatically given and acquired. In spite of the strong attachment of these peoples to the values of democracy, economic prosperity and cultural development – factors which orientate them towards the European Community – this spirit of opening-up still has to be built, to have new life breathed into it, and to be ‘resuscitated’ in those places where it is beginning to die out.

Artan Fuga

University of Tirana

Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

Notes

1. See Marcin Frybes (ed.), *Une Nouvelle Europe Centrale [A New Central Europe]*, Paris, Éditions de la Découverte 1998, p. 223.
2. Adam Michnik, *La deuxième révolution [The Second Revolution]*, Paris, Éditions de La Découverte 1990, p. 52.
3. Václav Havel, *L'angoisse de la liberté [The Anxiety of Freedom]*, Éditions de l'Aube 1995, p. 82.
4. Jeliou Jeleu, *Bulgarie, terre d'Europe [Bulgaria, a country of Europe]*, Paris, Éditions Frison-Roche 1998, p. 45.