

Transcultural Communication in the Central European Region: Freedom, Equality and Ties with the Natural Environment

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1. Introduction

What is the most urgent challenge at the present time? Which struggle is the most intractable in contemporary Central Europe? Well, it depends upon whom you ask. It is likely that economists would point to economic issues, sociologists would come up with sociological ones and environmentalists would suggest environmental problems. Social science (that is science that inquires into various aspects of the human relationship to the world, which implies that both economics and cultural ecology are included) suffers from the disease of specialization (Snow, 1964) and lacks a thoroughly holistic approach.

Despite the abiding wish of many experts to present their disciplines as exact sciences analyzing hard data, social science remains tightly bound to subjectivity.¹ In addition, the questions it asks are inevitably linked to politics, which has no scientific basis at all, yet we often live under the illusion that social science is indeed an objective field of study without any political impact. Different actors on the political stage offer different solutions to the pressing problems of our society, and this is perceived as legitimate, but claiming that economics, sociology, philosophy or cultural ecology should also respond to the unresolved dilemmas of our times would be rejected as being overtly ideological. Scientists should describe and politicians prescribe, should they not?

Nevertheless, a closer look makes it clear that there is no chance of dealing successfully with any of the issues that the risk society (Beck, 1992) is facing unless all possible actors collaborate. In other words, we need collective ac-

¹ By subjectivity I do not mean only stands taken by an individual but also “collective subjectivity”, thus attitudes adopted by groups of people that have enough power to influence the public discourse.

tion within the spheres of politics, and natural and social science, including economics, civil society, and religion, just to name the most important ones.

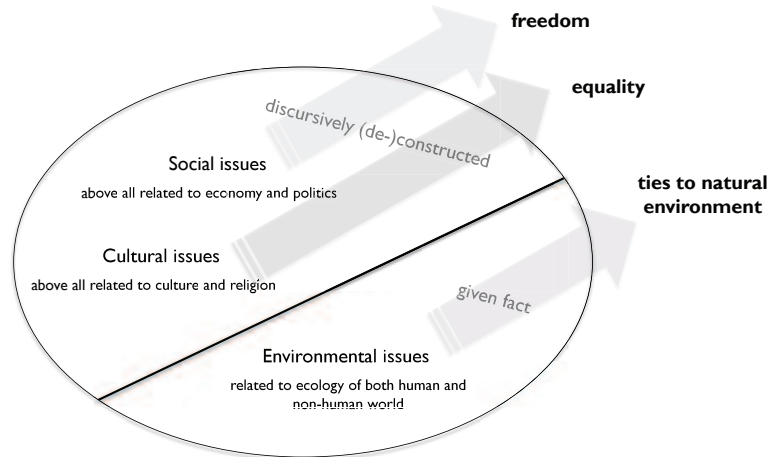
Such a general call, however, would not lead to any tangible results if we were not able to specify the tasks awaiting us. This text elaborates on the issue of present-day difficulties in the region of Central Europe, including cultural heterogeneity, and ideas (principles, postulates) that could lead us out from the chaotic social climate that has recently become quite violent.

There is plenty of literature on Central Europe and this collective monograph is among the most contemporaneous contributions to the debate, even though it is hardly ever approached from an environmental perspective. The reader might feel puzzled – how could environmentalism be of use when discussing immigration, social disparities or cultural clashes? On the following pages, three phenomena are considered for a better overview of “the heart of Europe”: freedom, equality, and ties to the natural environment. The first two concepts have been discursively constructed (and de-constructed), while the latter is the only given and unquestionable fact, i.e. humans have immutable ties to nature.² And it is these bonds with the natural environment that we can learn from environmentalism.

The initial thesis of the chapter is the following statement: One of the main contemporary challenges of Central Europe is to learn how to deal with social, cultural, and environmental issues in a coherent, interconnected way. Such a holistic strategy can only be built upon basic assumptions that would guide our society in the face of strong social, political, economic, cultural or ecological pressures. The text offers a response to each aspect of human endeavor facing challenges, as indicated in the illustration below:

² One might argue that everything regarding people, their relationship to nature included, is in a way socially constructed. I do not doubt that modern science substantially influences our attitude toward nature. Nevertheless, when I say that our ties to the natural environment are a given, I am not speaking about values or attitudes. I am merely asserting that whatever people think or believe, their life is dependent upon nature and culture does have an impact on the natural environment.

Fig. 1. Challenges of Central Europe



Source: Author.

The contribution is divided into two main parts. In the first chapter, the current central european landscape is described, starting from the general characteristics in terms of culture, society, politics, economy, and ecology, and moving on to the more specific themes of society, culture and environment. The second chapter inquires into the principles of freedom, equality and bonds with the natural environment, their meaning and ramifications. Methodologically, the text is based on an analysis of primary documents and secondary data.

2. The transcultural overview of Central Europe

Before we dive into the actual analysis, basic terms such as *Central Europe*, *cultural heterogeneity* and *transcultural* should be defined.

In this text, Central Europe is approached as an ambiguous “mental community”³ rather than a closed geographical area. Nevertheless, there are some historical, environmental as well as cultural ties between central european countries that allow us to conceptualize this part of Europe as a whole.⁴

The countries we include within the term is a question of consensus, e.g. there is a European Union grant programme called Central Europe that encourages cooperation among the following countries (or parts of them) in

³ It was B. Anderson (1991) who introduced the concept of an imagined mental community that is coherent and cohesive although it is impossible to personally know all its members.

⁴ “Central Europe [...] has never existed as a real or firm unit, it has always been just ‘in people’s heads’” (Havelka, 2006, p. 11–12). Havelka’s text neatly summarizes the discussion about the relevance and content of the term.

the region: Austria, the Czech Republic, parts of Germany, Hungary, parts of Italy, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and parts of Ukraine.⁵

Fig. 2. The region of Central Europe



Source: <http://www.central2013.eu>.

By cultural heterogeneity, what is intended is the existence of different cultural patterns within a (geographically determined or simply imagined) particular area. The word “culture” comprises more than just folklore or the arts. It also includes material background, behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Central Europe is (and has always been, even though the level of diversity is rising) culturally heterogeneous in the sense that people with dissimilar and sometimes conflicting worldviews live their lives next to each other, unable to avoid – as Emmanuel Lévinas would say – meeting the other.

If one of the most striking features of culture is its variability, transculturality might be understood as a societal state in which cultures differentiate, become ever more complex, mix, network and hybridize (Welsch, 1999),

⁵ The fact that not always entire countries count as belonging to Central Europe illustrates the concept’s complexity. We shall not dwell on the issue of defining Central Europe further since it is not the purpose of the text to challenge the rationality of the expression. As for the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme itself, Ukraine has been removed from the list of cooperating countries in the 2014–2020 period, probably for political reasons.

and the need to communicate, despite cultural disparities, becomes vitally important. Our society's *transcultural capital*, if I may coin such a term, does not consist of what various cultures simply have in common. Rather, it embraces ideas and principles that disregard cultural affiliation; in other words, ideas that are culturally independent. Whether there are any will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

2.1. Where we stand: Central Europe nowadays

The thrilling aspect of the region in question that covers over 1 million km² and is home to more than 140 million people (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020 Cooperation Programme [CE 2020]*, 2014, p. 5) is the ambivalent nature of its identity. Throughout history, vast areas of Central Europe used to be included in mighty empires with a truly multicultural outlook (e.g. the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as well as Prussia to some extent), while at the end of the 19th century the fight for independence fueled by the idea of the nation state was initiated. After WWI, the map of the region looked quite similar to the current one. WWII caused immense changes again, mostly in regard to the structure of the population, but also the economy and politics as “West” and “East” began to mean a fundamentally different thing in the post-war period. Nowadays, we can speak neither of a unified Central Europe nor of a zone of completely free and independent countries; some parts of it have belonged to so-called developed countries with democratic laws and a civil society for almost a century; some (such as the Czech Republic) have freed themselves from the influence of the totalitarian Soviet regime a little more than two decades ago; and, there are places (such as Ukraine) where an external superpower still hinders the country's authentic development. The political and economic entity of the European Union seems to work as a facilitator towards unity, even though there are voices raised against its proclaimed legitimacy, and the future of the Union is unclear.

Central Europe “owns a large number of assets but also faces numerous challenges, [such as] globalization and economic development; social cohesion; demographic change; climate change; energy; natural and cultural resources; accessibility, transport and communication infrastructure; and governance structures” (*CE 2020*, 2014, p. 6). Let us briefly comment on the most important of these.

From an economic point of view, the share of welfare and investment potential is very uneven, due to a certain extent to the historical divide mentioned above but also because of the diverse character of particular regions. Urban agglomerations largely differ from rural areas that suffer from a brain drain; some locations are highly dependent on tourism as their only substantial source of income, which makes them vulnerable during economic crises such as the one we are currently experiencing (*CE 2020*, 2014). A superficial

impression from central european cities might make one believe that the transition process has succeeded, yet the negative impacts of “the change in technology and the shift to consumer markets as the economic driving force, allied to the opening up of the countries’ economy to imports and the deregulation of financial markets” (Addy & Silný, 2003, p. 4) are very much present to this day. One of the most destructive effects of the badly managed transition period was a general loss of trust⁶ – local authorities and politicians, foreign advisers, entrepreneurs, etc. – disappointed the population and strengthened the feeling of insecurity (already rooted in people’s minds under the communist regime) in an incomprehensible world.⁷ We shall get back to this point in the second part of the chapter where the values and core principles of transcultural communication are discussed.

Social conditions in Central Europe are correspondingly unbalanced. Social polarization, segregation, unemployment, risk of poverty (CE 2020, 2014) – those are some of the most pressing issues the region has to tackle.⁸ They are interconnected with rather gloomy demographic trends; there is a clear tendency toward an aging and shrinking population. In addition, “enhanced migration to CE⁹ as well as within CE to more affluent regions next to changes in family structures are likely to occur. Consequently, fast changes in social life are to be expected across CE and beyond” (Scopetta, Macháčová & Moser, 2013, p. 1). We shall reflect upon the topic of migration later in this text.

As for the question of the environment, Central Europe is expected to keep experiencing the impacts of climate change, especially floods and droughts. In almost every year recently, 2013 and 2014 included, the region has faced extreme weather conditions and unusual seasonal events. The fact

⁶ I would like to acknowledge Peter Moreé, who mentioned it at the conference Our Common Present, Prague, in March 2013, for this idea.

⁷ “As well as the immediate economic problems faced by CEE economies, there is a huge problem that has been created by the way in which the transformation has been carried out. *The destruction of human and social capital has been enormous*” (Addy & Silný, 2003, p. 7, *my italics*). And elsewhere in Addy’s and Silný’s work: “The rapid privatization was carried out in a way which did not respect positive *cultural and ethical values* within the region” (p. 8, *my italics*).

⁸ What is more, criminality, corruption and mafia practices increased dramatically in the region after 1989. (Addy & Silný, 2003)

⁹ States in the former “West” are still more attractive as immigrant countries in comparison to newer EU Member States, despite the fact that the economies of Poland or Slovakia are growing much faster than those of Austria or Germany. There might be several reasons for it: the tradition of emigration to older Member States, networks of friends and relatives already settled there, established NGOs and state institutions working in the field, immigration and multiculturalism reflected in law, a well-organized system of social benefits for immigrants and asylum seekers, etc.

that we still greatly rely on fossil energy sources¹⁰ and energy imports (e.g. from Russia) makes the area even less prepared for the future (CE 2020, 2014). Among the most urgent issues regarding the environment we could list the following: “the fragmentation of habitats, biodiversity loss, water, soil and air pollution and unsustainable management practices and usage conflicts” (CE 2020, 2014, p. 9). Generally speaking, Central Europe still is – environmentally – quite a pleasant place to live, but serious threats to public health and both human and non-human wellbeing do exist in particular areas.

Cultural and natural resources, on the other hand, are rich in variety. Diversity both in culture and nature are among the most apparent strengths of the region. Central Europe is home to numerous ethnic and linguistic minorities; its landscape is full of cultural and natural heritage sites and human creativity has the potential to boost their quality of life. And to do so, Central Europe has to become aware of its ruinous deficiencies in the social, cultural and environmental spheres.

2.2. Challenge #1 – Irresponsible freedom and the nightmare of competitiveness

The year 1989 is often associated with the victorious fight for freedom that the communist regimes denied to Central Europeans who were unlucky enough to live to the East of the Iron Curtain. Freedom as such is a loaded expression; its meaning is culturally¹¹ and historically¹² dependent. In other words, to explain and to agree on what freedom means is far more difficult than, let us say, describing and comprehending the idea of gravity. Many current problems and future pitfalls for Central Europe (such as low political participation, corruption, embezzlement of public property, etc.) are caused by the arbitrary uses and abuses of the word “freedom”.¹³

A basic definition could be “the absence of constraint” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 146), yet the transition period in former communist countries such as the

¹⁰ Renewable energy is on rise, but doubling or even tripling the share of the energy pie is still insufficient if we look at absolute numbers. According to Eurostat, in 2012, 14 % of the EU-28’s energy came from renewable sources, 11 % in the Czech Republic (Eurostat, 2014a).

¹¹ By cultural dependence, I mean the undeniable grounding of the concept of freedom – as, e.g. the United Nations presents it in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – in the Christian religion, which is the cornerstone of the European (or more precisely, Euro-American) ethos. This fact is hard to ignore despite the reluctance of the EU to acknowledge it officially.

¹² By historical dependence, even within one (European) culture, I mean the dynamic evolution of the understanding of the term throughout the centuries; see, e.g. freedom in ancient Greece versus freedom in the Middle Ages versus freedom after WWII.

¹³ In the Czech context, a good illustration of how a different philosophical background can influence the specific political actions of a country’s leading politician would be the divergent notions of freedom according to former presidents Václav Havel and Václav Klaus.

Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary clearly proves that a lack of rules leads to chaos and misconduct rather than a free and flourishing society. A more concrete, positive definition is “a condition of liberation from social and cultural forces that are perceived as impeding full self-realization” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 146).

The opportunity to make the best use of one’s own talents was indeed greatly desired in the region some 25 years ago, but the development that took place in Central Europe shows that decoupling freedom from responsibility (political, social, ecological, etc.) has been a great failure. In fact, “the growth of freedom must encompass the growth of responsibility, which means accepting the ever growing restrictions which are necessary for the shared existence of humanity” (Kostolníková, 2011, p. 57). If we want to foster freedom, the absence of constraints leads us down a blind alley. The perverted concept of freedom, interpreted in the 1990s as freedom to do whatever one wishes, made the central european nations believe that the Western welfare state could be copied-pasted overnight (Ágh, 2012), the failure of which led to bitter disappointment and skepticism.¹⁴

Loosening the restrictions of economic activity in the name of a very limited and antisocial approach to freedom went hand in hand with the glorification of competitiveness.¹⁵ On the website of the Centre for International Competitiveness, it is defined as “the capability of an economy to maintain increasing standards of living for those who participate in it,¹⁶ by attracting and maintaining firms with stable or rising market shares in an activity” (Centre for International Competitiveness, n.d.). The European Commission, whose policies and measurements are crucial for the future course of central european countries, has recently introduced the notion of

¹⁴ This fact is sometimes expressed as the paradox of “more freedom, less security” (Ágh, 2012, p. 5), but I would argue that separating the feeling of freedom from the feeling of security is just as unwise as separating it from responsibility. According to a poll conducted between the years 2000 and 2007 by the Czech Center for Empirical Research, 88 % of Czechs appreciate that more goods and services became available after 1989, while less than 20 % recognize that fairness, security, order and the moral profile of society have improved (STEM, 2007). Consumerism is thus encouraged at the expense of solidarity and social cohesion.

¹⁵ In general, the question of measuring and constructing relevant indexes is complex and there is not enough space here to elaborate on it properly. The paradigm has changed over the last decade or two and new, more holistic indexes (such as the Genuine Progress Indicator – GPI, Happy Planet Index – HPI, Sustainability Index – SI, Bertelsmann Transformation Index – BTI, etc.) have appeared in competition to the GDP. For more information see, e.g. Andersen (2013).

¹⁶ Please note that “standard of living”, not “quality of life” is at stake. Also, only economic participants, not people whose economic activity is limited or unquantifiable (such as child care, housekeeping, volunteering, etc.), are expected to profit from competitiveness.

regional competitiveness,¹⁷ which is more elaborate and takes into account the various levels and multiple outcomes of economic activity than just the usual neoliberal focus on further profit. Nevertheless, in the rhetoric of the politicians of several central european countries (and in the actions of their governments, too), competitiveness has become a mantra that justifies severe cuts to public expenditure and the introduction of austerity measures. As a result, if there is any positive legacy from the socialist past in the central european region (such as the importance of fair access to health care, education, social benefits, etc.), it has weakened along the way “back to Europe”, and thus to the standards of Western countries that are (and that is the paradox of the current phase of capitalism) far from being globally competitive.¹⁸

A true return to the idea of Europe¹⁹ would mean a serious reconsideration of European values such as freedom and human rights. It is of great importance whether we evaluate quality of freedom and the level of human rights in absolute or relative terms. Compared to countries in Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, or even the US where the death penalty still exists, Europe, including Central Europe, is a free continent where human rights are comparatively well respected. Nevertheless, if we look at the growing number of – often young and qualified – people living life on the breadline, at the working conditions of migrants, women, elderly and other vulnerable groups, or at the levels of xenophobia, racism and other forms of socially generated hatred, enthusiastic statements about freedom and human rights would seem out of place.²⁰

Central european countries liberated themselves from the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and even though the danger of totalitarianism is always present, we have the language at our disposal that enables us to describe and comprehend totalitarian mechanisms.²¹ We are speechless, though, when confronted with phenomena such as competitiveness, economic growth and asocial individualism, which have profoundly changed the mental landscape in the region. A new form of slavery, this time without

¹⁷ For further information on the definition and broader context, see Annoni and Kozovska (2010).

¹⁸ It seems that contemporary China, a country that has always eclectically adopted useful concepts and measures from the outside world, is also entering a period of economic stagnation, if not decline, which confirms that the global economy without global ethics (Küng, 2000) works to the detriment of human welfare.

¹⁹ See, e.g. Patočka (1992), Horyna (2001) or Reale (2005).

²⁰ One sad example among central european countries is Hungary where the state constitution was changed in 2013, putting clear constraints on freedom and liberty. In 2014, President V. Orbán stated that liberal democracy is not the right path for Hungary.

²¹ Starting with the analysis of Hannah Arendt in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* first published in 1951 and continuing up to the investigation of Timothy Snyder in his book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, published in 2010.

an easily recognizable apparatus and identifiable leaders, is the political and social challenge of Central Europe in the 21st century.

2.3. Challenge #2 – 1st class citizens, 2nd class citizens and the rest

Even though central European states do not belong to the top European immigrant countries,²² cultural heterogeneity has always been relatively high in the area and is rapidly increasing as a result of various global trends. The fall of the Iron Curtain was obviously a turning point. “Prior to 1990 migration was severely limited in all countries of the region. [...] Since the early 1990s the situation has been changing dramatically. [...] The region witnessed a huge increase in complexity of migration forms – from labor mobility through transit migration to forced migration of asylum seekers and refugees. In many countries of the region immigrants of different status appeared for the first time in the post-war history” (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2005, p. 4).

It goes without saying that migration depends on complex demographic, economic and political factors. It is impossible to inquire into migration thoroughly in the central European region – there are hundreds of pages containing statistical data and analyses thereof, and scholarly work on this topic is plentiful.²³ In this text, we shall examine the issue of equality that is at stake when cultures and religions clash. Examples of well-established democracies in Western Europe, such as Switzerland²⁴ or the United Kingdom,²⁵ where freedom of movement is questioned and immigration quotas have been introduced, might indicate a future trend for Central Europe as well.

Issues related to culture, in the broad anthropological meaning of the word, attract a lot of attention as the superficial and formal ideology of multiculturalism loses its defenders.²⁶ It is remarkable though that it is often culture rather than social and economic causes that is pinpointed as a generator of problems, whether it be the case of Roma citizens or Muslim immigrants. Culture certainly does matter and there are indeed cultural differences that can easily cause misunderstandings or even conflicts. Yet if we confuse cultural determination with social or economic factors, it would

²² According to Eurostat, in 2012 emigrants outnumbered immigrants in the Czech Republic and Poland. All other CE countries report growing immigration (Eurostat, 2014b).

²³ In the Czech Republic, a valid source of information in this respect is Multicultural Center Prague with its specialized library.

²⁴ See the anti-immigration referendum held and won in Switzerland in February 2014 (Traynor, 2014). We shall add that in the referendum held in November 2014 the Swiss refused to reduce the immigration quota any further.

²⁵ See David Cameron’s negative stand taken on migration in the EU, expressed in the *Financial Times* on 26th November 2013.

²⁶ For deeper insight into the topic of multiculturalism and its future potential see Sokolíčková *et al.* (2012).

be difficult to achieve any solution that would not destroy the image of an inclusive society. Let me explain why.

Central European countries, as they all are Member States of the EU, comply with EU policies in the field of social inclusion. The official motto “Unity in Diversity” expresses the readiness of Europeans to accept and incorporate the various cultures and traditions of the continent. Such an enlightened notion of equality, where differences are legitimate and not discriminated against, is a theoretical concept that is unfortunately pushed to the sidelines as soon as the economy stumbles.²⁷ In other words, we agree with the idea of being equal and entitled to preserve our cultural habits as long as our material standard of living is guaranteed to increase. Central Europeans showed great enthusiasm and openness after 1989, but with the economic crisis that began in 2008, fraternity, which necessarily leads to a collective fate (of central European countries together with all EU Member States), became an inconvenient burden. Western Europe looks down on Southern and Central Europe and since the mechanism of victimization (Burda, 2013a) works and the weakest link in the chain is always accused first, immigrants labelled as culturally incompatible are most unwelcome. We blame culture, but for economic reasons.

Visible acts of hostility towards “them”, whoever “them” may be (though they are certainly not “us”), take place in all central European countries and the rate of violence and discrimination against migrants and minorities is alarming. According to the *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey* published in 2009, Central Europeans report being the target of unfair behavior in Western countries such as Ireland or United Kingdom, while at the same time Roma are heavily discriminated against in Central Europe. Among the “top five” countries experiencing the highest level of discrimination are three countries from the region in question, namely the Czech Republic,²⁸ Hungary and Poland (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). We can hypothesize about certain amounts of “cascade intolerance” against migrants and minorities when injustice experienced abroad correlates with unfair behavior towards the socially and economically disadvantaged in the country of origin.

²⁷ On 15th October 2013, the Financial Times published an article entitled “Europe: United by hostility” (Chaffin, 2013).

²⁸ “The issue of national minorities [...] is in many ways problematic in the Czech Republic. [...] A negative view on Roma and a requirement of a hard stand against them belongs to fundamental program points of extreme right-wing movements. [...] For the Czech Republic, the identity of national and ethnic minorities will continue to be an important topic in the following decades because there is an increase in the number of foreigners who want to live here permanently” (Nosková & Bednařík, 2011, p. 7).

Apart from irresponsible freedom and the nightmare of competitiveness, Central Europe is facing the challenge of an imbalance in terms of its inhabitants' dignity. No matter how loud the EU elites protest against the common perception regarding 1st and 2nd class citizens (Barroso, 2014), civic equality is – for the time being – an illusion in Central Europe.

2.4. Challenge #3 – Ignorance of being tied to the natural environment

In 1989, those parts of Central Europe that are situated to the East of the former Iron Curtain stood on the cusp of a new era. The capitalist experience of Western countries could have taught them some lessons about the natural environment and the folly of sacrificing resources, clean air or whole landscapes for the sake of short-term economic benefits. In 1995, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, a German scientist and politician, made a speech in Prague in which he warned against the impacts of an ecological crisis that would be likely to occur unless action was taken in time. “Most Central Europeans do not perceive the challenges that Central Europe is facing nowadays as ecological ones. There exist good reasons, though, to take the natural environment very seriously in the heart of Europe” (Weizsäcker, 1995, p. 5). In his defense of ecological effectiveness, Weizsäcker rightly predicted the future risks of unemployment, low competitiveness and the consequent reluctance to invest in environmental protection because of its overly high costs. Cheap energy and natural resources would allow companies to increase their immediate profit at the expense of the population in the future said Weizsäcker, and encouraged Central Europe to strive for ecological efficiency.

Almost 20 years after his speech, the region is suffering from many diseases and hesitating about the introduction of identified yet unpopular remedies.²⁹ It should be mentioned that a very optimistic view on the environmental aspect of the transition process in central European countries is presented by Archibald and Bochniarz (2008) and Wilkinson (2008). Wilkinson praises the wisdom and courage of Central Europeans who supposedly underwent an elegant and environmentally responsible transition from communism to capitalism. The application of the Kuznets curve³⁰ to Central

²⁹ “Protecting the Central European environment now and for future generations is one of the pre-conditions for sustainable growth. This is particularly relevant for Central Europe where an economic catching-up process is taking place, creating both new opportunities as well as threats for the environment” (<http://www.central2013.eu>). Sustainable growth, itself a problematic concept, is thus the EU’s goal for caring for the natural environment in CE. Some of the consequences of the “economic catching-up process” have been discussed in the previous pages.

³⁰ “The environmental Kuznets curve hypothesizes that environmental damage first increases with rising income and then declines” (Archibald & Bochniarz, 2008, p. 35). According

European countries leads to the claim that “transition does not necessarily affect sustainability adversely” (Archibald & Bochniarz, 2008, p. 42). Alas, the high level of ecological vulnerability of the region (*Regional Challenges in the Perspective of 2020 – Phase 2: Deepening and Broadening the Analysis: Final Report*, 2011) proves the contrary. Some dangerous environmental legacies of the previous regime have been successfully overcome, others continue and new ones have emerged. “Many problems inherited from state socialism have persisted and new environmental problems have been created by some of the changes since 1989” (Pavlinek & Pickles, 2000, p. 286).

Changes, often irreversible, to the natural environment are closely related to human endeavors, but so far they have affected the marginalized and the poor much more than the privileged and the affluent.³¹ Central Europeans, despite their inferiority complex towards Westerners, are among the most advantaged peoples in comparison with the so-called Third World. Nevertheless, the level of exposure to natural hazards also differs greatly within the area according to social and economic status. Taking the Czech Republic as an example, regions with the highest rates of air pollution such as northeast Moravia (Ostrava and its surroundings) or northwest Bohemia (Ústí nad Labem and its surroundings) are also regions struggling with social disparities and racism.

Mózes Szekély from the ELTE University in Budapest underlines the fact that “ecological and social problems cross conceptual and geographic boundaries” (2003, p. 97). He quotes Kofi Annan who concluded his report *We the Peoples* stating that “leaving to successor generations an environmentally sustainable future emerge[s] as one of the most daunting challenges of all” (2000, p. 17). Central European countries have always been both socially and environmentally intertwined, and so are their current problems, triggered by globalization and environmental tragedies such as climate change.³²

But which institution is responsible for a positive development? A young woman from Prague told Robert Wilkinson when asked about the most urgent challenge facing a free Central Europe: “It is us, of course. It is our way of thinking” (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 12). The importance of top-down en-

to this liberalist approach, environmental degradation is a necessary cost of economic growth in its initial phase. Several central European countries, the Czech Republic included, applied this “act now, think later” attitude during the 1990s.

³¹ See, e.g. the study *The geography of poverty, disasters and climate extremes in 2030* (Shepherd et al., 2013). The poorest, such as sub-Saharan Africans or South Asians, are often also those most exposed to natural risks. A strong voice advocating for the eradication of poverty as the most requisite environmental measure is Bjørn Lomborg.

³² With the exception of Austria and the eastern parts of Germany, Central European countries show similar levels of vulnerability in almost all analyzed areas. See, <http://regions2020.oir.at/>.

vironmental policies is certainly not to be underestimated, yet what counts even more is what the people think, what they consider vitally important and what values they stand for in their everyday lives. In other words, “the focus of issues is determined by the awareness of values” (Szekély, 2003, p. 97). In the following chapter, we shall discuss the Central European notion of the value of freedom much invoked and misused in the economic sphere, the value of equality challenged by rising cultural diversity, and the value of respect for nature attracting deeper but not wider attention.

3. A road map for the present times

The idea of an ethos valid for the region of Central Europe cannot really be supported by documented facts and hard statistical data; in this part we move on to ethics and philosophical anthropology. I have argued that central european countries are dealing with several issues, the nature of which might seem disconnected although they are in fact interlinked and therefore have to be handled holistically. First, economics takes precedence over politics and ethics, we distrust key state institutions and our opportunities in life (housing, health care, education, work, etc.) become gradually constrained. Second, distinctiveness in culture and religion is perceived as ever more disturbing, sometimes as a weak excuse for economic protectionism, sometimes as a sign of pure xenophobia and racism. And third, “nature’s life-sustaining services, on which our species depends for its survival, are being seriously disrupted and degraded by our own everyday activities” (Szekély, 2003, p. 96), while the pace of progress in sustainability is far too slow. Are there any ethical values that might guide us at present toward a better future?

Umberto Galimberti (2004), an Italian psychologist and philosopher, claims that the old ethical systems that once worked in Europe no longer function due to the dramatic changes of living conditions in the so-called technological era. He proposes a provisional *vagabond ethics* according to which there are no stable principles and no perceptible horizon to anchor our values. Galimberti’s convincing analysis dismantles any hope for the resurrection of traditional ethics and renounces dogmatic certainties. Let us follow his example and avoid the usual temptation to erect stable ethical pillars.³³

As has been already hinted, economics and politics in contemporary Central Europe muddle the notion of freedom and increasing cultural diversity questions the unassailability of human equality. Whether we like

³³ Adopting Galimberti’s *vagabond ethics*, we run the postmodern risk of constant moral relativizing, which is certainly not desirable. Being an ethical *vagabond* requires more responsibility toward other people and the outside world, and more rational and emotional reflection, not less.

it or not, both freedom and equality are discursive, meaning that different societies understand the terms differently or even that the same society can modify its understanding over time with regard to various social and political changes. As the Slovak cultural scientist Slavomír Gálik (2011) observes: “Old ethoses are subsiding in modern and central European society, but the new ethos has not come into being. Europe, or Central Europe, is not quite Christian anymore, and not quite utilitarian and pragmatic. [...] This state is highly unstable and if we witness no radical change then many of the present problems in Europe, including central Europe, will very probably continue” (p. 65–66).

If we accept Galimberti’s thesis that there is no new ethos that will come into being, two possibilities remain. First, we can evaluate whether any guidelines stemming from the old ethos still have any significance for today’s globalized society. Second, we can inquire whether there are any guidelines that would not have a cultural origin, or put differently, guidelines that are valid throughout history and for all human societies without exception.

3.1. Only free people can be equal

As we have already mentioned, the search for a solution to social issues in the central european region tightly bound to economics and politics involves a discussion about the value of freedom. There is certainly not enough space here to elaborate at length on the roots and historical evolution of the term; others have done this already, see, e.g. Patterson (1991). We should rather ask to what extent freedom belongs to the transcultural capital of the region and how important the concept is for the region’s future development.

It should be reiterated right at the beginning that my understanding of freedom is socially constructed (acknowledging that it was a Christian idea to transform the ancient Greek concept into a universal principle that was secularized later in the 18th century), and it is thus hard to share the confidence of Mária Klobušická (2011) who claims simply that “God created man free” (p. 67) and “the only true morality is the Christian morality” (p. 72). We could agree with Piotr Machura (2011) who stresses the certainty of social imaginary³⁴ and says that “there is no simple symmetry between the demand of freedom [...] and the consciousness of responsibility among the societies of the [CE] region” (p. 103). Machura uses the Polish example, which is unique, but he offers a valid generalization about Western standards and the modern

³⁴ The term, inspired by Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, was coined by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004): “The way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations” (p. 23).

way of life that produces alienation from all possible institutions and a lack of solidarity, which has inflicted severe social damage on the new Central Europe. It is not surprising that human equality is regarded as dubious and even suspicious, because it is premature to ask Central Europeans to accept the otherness of the Other before they formulate a clear idea about their own freedom and responsibility that is derivative of this active freedom. “Neither idolatrous admiration of Western standards of living and institutions, nor self-focused conservative memory, is a remedy for the traumas and complexes of Central European societies. Hence one of the most important tasks that Central Europe faces is to find a convenient narrative, an appropriate social imaginary, which would [...] explain Central Europeans to themselves” (Machura, 2011, p. 109). Freedom in Central Europe is thus far from being a firm principle that is followed in people’s everyday lives. It is rather a process, an ephemeral goal never to be achieved. In addition, “we are always as free as it is possible to be within our culture and, respectively, we share responsibility with the whole community” (Machura, 2011, p. 110). This means that social imagination determines economics, politics and ultimately ethics as well. That is not to say that an individual is powerless – quite the contrary – but an individual action becomes empowering when it enters the social (and subsequently also the political) dimension.

Pavel Kvaltýn (2011) is harsh when he remarks: “Every single activity and choice is essentially dependent on social parameters, on the basis of a socially constructed symbolic universe. [...] In this sense, the idea of freedom is evidently just an illusion” (p. 120). But he continues: “If reality is socially constructed, as my identity is constructed, then my responsibility dwells in Martin Buber’s dialogue: I and Thou. [...] Every single encounter is the axis of the whole of being and the only possible way to change it. In this sense dialogue is omnipotential” (p. 121). We can conclude, in accordance with Galimberti’s call for vagabond ethics, that Central Europe, being itself a socially constructed entity *par excellence*, has to work hard on its never-to-be-completed narrative of responsible freedom, and this hard work can only be done collectively, within a transcultural dialogue.

3.2. Only equal people can be free

The idea of equality has played an inestimable role in the history of European philosophy and law³⁵, and in the central european context it surely has a specific connotation due to the communist past. Communist ideology translated into real politics in Central Europe between the 1940s and 1980s and

³⁵ For a brief insight see Ježková (2010). Ježková’s analysis is rather superficial but she pinpoints some important definitions and names leading theoreticians, such as Locke or Rousseau.

operated with the concept of equality in an ambiguous way, which is likely to have partially corrupted the idea even for the generations born after the fall of the regime. “The long-lasting impact of the communist period on the range of social values, and hence on individual and collective behaviour, appears to be a common truth” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 107). Perceiving another human being as inherently equal has become, to some maybe surprisingly, rare if not completely absent in central european socialist countries and their successor regimes. “The anomic and dual social order maintained a strong division between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 109). Furthermore, the transition from communism to capitalism was anything but smooth and after a short-lived feeling of unity, the fight for survival began once again. “If people emphasize economic and physical security, they feel more threatened by foreigners, ethnic diversity and cultural changes” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 110).

What is more, equality as such seems to be less universal in central and eastern european societies, the ethos of which differs from the West (Machura, 2010). First, ethnicity there matters greatly when it comes to solidarity based on the recognition of equal rights and needs of another person. Second, people still rely a lot on the state and are less interested in cultivating the notion of individual rights. Third, and this has already been mentioned as the result of a chain reaction, the feeling of inferiority towards Westerners and the desire to be considered equal should not be underestimated when trying to understand the extremely low level of solidarity with immigrants (Van Oorschot, as cited in Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010). Machura (2010) argues that “the claims to equality [...] are always rooted in a certain recognition and evaluation of historical heritage” (p. 23) and that thinking of central european countries as an axiological union is wrong, but it is right to assume that there is a strong sense of solidarity among the region’s nations.

This ethnic and cultural bond within Central Europe only accentuates how loose the ties are with newcomers and the culturally different. Even though according to European Values Studies (data set from 1999–2000) tolerance toward people from a different cultural background is relatively high, the interpreters of the data set observe: “as acceptance of cultural diversity increases, any expression of non-tolerance becomes undesirable or unlawful behaviour in most European societies, which strongly influences declarative and real expression of distance to immigrants and ethnic minority groups” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 127).

Is it possible to make any conclusion about the notion of equality in Central Europe? Is equality strongly emphasized in central european countries and can we consider it as part of the region’s transcultural capital?

Rimac and Zrinščak note that social norms and values generally need to be individually internalized in order to strengthen social solidarity. The

communist era has surely had an influence and so does the fact that cultural diversity is much higher in Western countries to where emigrants from profoundly different cultures head more often than to central European countries. What also matters is economic performance and social trust; the higher both are, the more likely it is that people become sensitive to the needs of other people, even those belonging to distant cultural groups.

If individual internalization of values is decisive (and not social, country or regional characteristics), the same is true for equality as it was for freedom: one can learn about it exclusively in relation with another person, through a dialogue that is not feasible if any of the participants is considered by the others to be inferior/superior.

3.3. Ties to the natural environment as the ultimate principle of transcultural communication

Freedom and equality are among the requirements of a transcultural dialogue which at the same time fosters and cultivates one's feeling of both independence and inherent connectedness to other human beings. An ethical vagabond meets people, encounters situations, and makes decisions about his or her life path under the influence of social imaginaries and personal beliefs.

The central European area has undergone much historical and ideological turbulence that shattered the understanding of freedom and equality. Central European peoples are striving for their own credible narrative of what it means to be free and equal, and this process is taking place in the midst of complex changes that include the economy, politics and culture. As the current crisis in the Ukraine shows, ethnic rivalries and the unhealed wounds of the past are still an issue of great delicacy, and both freedom and equality keep being re-defined as new circumstances arise.

Is it possible to find a principle with clear ethical connotations that is neither subject to change over the course of time nor culturally relative? With the failure of each new world summit or conference dealing with the theme of the natural environment, we can observe that ties with the natural environment have not become part of the world ethos, and despite all the positive development in Central Europe since 1989 it would be incorrect to think that the attitude toward nature has changed substantially in the region. Yet there is no doubt of the intrinsic dependency of people on the natural environment, and there is no single example, either in the past or in the present, of a healthy economy and society located in a sick environment.

In the lecture given by von Weizsäcker quoted above, he advised central European nations to be conscious of their natural wealth not *in spite of* the other difficult tasks such as the economic ones, but *because of* them. There is no attempt here to detail the multilayered discussion within anthropocentrism, biocentrism, deep ecology, etc. about the legitimacy of referring to

human well-being when defending the environment. Let us limit ourselves to the simple thesis that regardless of what society or an individual thinks about nature, they are tied to it in the most compelling way.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that consciousness of the ecological vulnerability of each culture does not delegitimize efforts to ground a transcultural dialogue on different principles, e.g. human dignity (Burda, 2013b). However, such attempts to formulate a fundamental ethical base clash with the postulate of Galimberti's vagabond ethics according to which no absolute value has a chance of being shared by everybody in today's diverse world. All culturally determined ideas, including dignity, freedom, equality, brotherhood, etc., are condemned to being rejected by those who ignore or even detest ethical imperatives stemming from different cultural traditions. Ties to the natural environment are not a principle "invented" or "discovered" by human beings, but rather a basic condition of life in general. The idea of nature, of course, is strongly influenced by culture, and people have diverging or thoroughly opposing attitudes toward nature, but that is irrelevant due to the fact that a damaged natural environment means a low quality of life or a direct threat to life.

The environmental danger for central European countries is manifold and it cannot be understood without taking into account the economic, political, social and cultural aspect of the present situation. If Central Europeans had a shared and inclusive narrative of freedom and equality, their readiness to face current challenges would be substantially increased. In a totalitarian society, people are prevented from active participation in decision-making and their critical thinking is suppressed. What is more, totalitarian regimes, even though they might claim the contrary, generate rigid social stratification and the distribution of power is uneven. One may argue that Central Europe consists of democratic states and the principles of freedom and equality are thus guaranteed and respected. In the preceding pages, we have challenged this superficial presumption. Seen from an environmental perspective, only free and equal people can cooperate efficiently in order to tackle environmental issues because freedom implies the capability to think, decide and act, while equality implies the right to be included in the community and the governance thereof.

At the same time, if the ties between the human world (demarcated by culture) and the natural environment were fully recognized, transcultural communication in Central Europe would have a solid base. Discussions about common values shared by "us" and "them" are long and rather exhausting, usually ending with a general relativization and the rejection of definite answers because of cultural differences. Being bound to nature is not a value to be shared; it is a fact we may or may not accept, but it cannot be falsified. Communication despite cultural differences is not a utopia if we realize

that barriers erected by culture can be dismantled through the notion of a universally human interest – a habitable planet.

4. Conclusion

In his report on democracy, liberty and freedom, Attila Ágh (2012) comments on the so-called triple crisis, which includes a transformation crisis, a post-accession crisis and the global crisis, and he mentions that these processes have a socio-economic, a socio-political and a socio-cultural aspect. In the previous pages, we have presented the thesis that economic, social, cultural and environmental issues that weight upon the central european region need a holistic response that takes all spheres into account. Three basic conditions, two determined by cultural interpretations and one universal, were discussed: a) freedom, the understanding of which affects economic and social measures; b) equality, which is difficult to obtain in a region that has complex historical legacies and has not yet found its way through cultural, religious and ethnic diversity; and c) ties to the natural environment, which is primarily relevant in ecological issues but also affects much more than that.

Transcultural communication in Central Europe, and thus interaction among participants with different cultural, religious, gender, racial and social backgrounds, is unlikely to take place unless the actors are mutually considered to be free and equal. I have claimed that the ideas of freedom and equality have a European origin. Even though they aspire to universal validity, the more culturally diverse Europe (Central Europe included) becomes, the harder it is to accomplish a transcultural consensus in this respect (which is not to say that it is pointless to make the effort). Ties to the natural environment might have a decisive say in transcultural communication, since it is not an ethical principle rooted in a particular cultural tradition, neither European nor any other. The close relationship between human life and the natural environment can be (and largely is) ignored for a certain period of time, yet it cannot be falsified. Central european peoples and newcomers from other European and non-European countries have no other choice than to share a limited environment; we can invent and adopt an economic paradigm, but we are not capable of creating another natural environment.

Calls for a return to an old ethos or for a shift towards a new one are often motivated by the best intentions. Central Europe nowadays, though, does not manifest a readiness and willingness to unite and follow a common economic, social or cultural direction. We are muddling through, left at the mercy of the vagabond ethics proposed by Galimberti. There is much potential in central european cultural capital and it is the task of politics (and science and arts) to elaborate upon it. A transcultural dialogue, however, needs to be built upon grounds that resolve conflicts rather than provoke them. Nobody, neither

the immigrant, nor the poor and the marginalized, is excluded from the human species that relies ecologically on its terrestrial niche. If we accept and take seriously into consideration that we are and will always be tied to the natural environment, the chances are high that a constructive transcultural dialogue in Central Europe will occur.

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