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The axiological dimension of the debate on the place of East Central Europe within Europe

The crisis of Europe may be interpreted in different ways, in view of the ambiguity of both the notion of "crisis" and that of "Europe". Looking at the issue from the perspective of the history of political ideas, it can be seen to have been one of the most frequently occurring interpretational questions in discussions on the condition of Europe at least since the times of the Enlightenment. "Were the ever more frequent use of this notion to be regarded as a sufficient indicator of a real crisis," writes Reinhart Koselleck, "then we would necessarily be living in an all-consuming crisis" (Koselleck 1990: 59). The interpretation of the condition of Europe in categories of crisis may be regarded – paradoxically – as evidence of the vitality of European intellectual life. European thought has reached a level of critical self-reflection, which continues to encourage the casting of doubt on the principles that lie at the foundations of social life. In recent years, the crisis of Europe has been linked primarily to certain events relating to the European Union which undermine faith in the future of the European project. The issues most often cited in this context are the migration crisis of 2015, Brexit, and troubles with East Central Europe.

This article will analyse the debate concerning the place of East Central Europe (a notion with a variable semantic range, although it usually has Hungary and Poland at the forefront) within the European Union. The debate naturally takes place on different planes; one of these is the discussion carried on at the level of *political axiology*. Each of the sides refers to certain values, to general notions, which are treated as criteria for the evaluation of political events and processes. Freedom, equality, sovereignty, tradition, protection of identity – these are just a few examples of such values. The research problem addressed here is the identification of the values that are at stake in this political dispute.

On reading the discussions on this subject, one may reach the conclusion that the source of many of the conflicts is disagreement on fundamental values. This concerns both the values cited by the parties to the debate, and – in cases where the same terms are used – the ways in which they are defined. Political discussions are often imbued with ill will, irrational means of persuasion, and simple demagogy. I wish to analyse here the way of thinking of those participants in the debate who support the countries of East Central Europe, extracting from them the most substantial arguments. Guided by the Latin motto *sine ira et studio*, I consider how they perceive the nature of the dispute, and what its consequences will be for the future of the European Union. Of course, this dispute is nothing new; indeed, it continues a long tradition whereby Europe's East stands in opposition to its West. I shall thus begin by introducing the wider historical context of this discussion.

The symbolic geography of Europe

Let us begin with the general notions used by those participating in the discussion. In Western Europe, such countries as Hungary and Poland are usually referred to as being in Eastern Europe, or less commonly in East Central Europe or Central Europe. Representatives of those countries prefer to think of themselves as representing Central Europe. Of course, the choice of terminological convention is not an inconsequential matter. Political notions are not axiologically neutral terms; they are primarily carriers of certain meanings. The aforementioned notions are not merely geographical terms, but denote certain cultural or political subjects. Looking from a historical perspective, we note that these terms are of quite recent origin. Until the eighteenth century, according to the dominant interpretation, Europe was divided into North and South. Countries such as Russia and Poland were regarded as Northern countries. The division into Eastern and Western Europe was an invention of the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, this new partition began to displace the North–South division from public discourse. At present, Russia is seen by many authors as a country that is politically and culturally different from Central Europe, or even as a non-European civilisation. It should be noted, however, that according to the symbolic geography of the Enlightenment, both Russia and Poland belonged to Eastern Europe. According to Larry Wolff, author of the important book *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Russia was subjected to the same identification process as Poland – it

was a country between Europe and Asia. Wolff seems to be correct in stating that such names as East and West have no objective meaning – they are simply a matter of perspective. What was once Northern Europe was redefined in the eighteenth century as Eastern Europe. In Wolff's view, this coincided with the introduction of the term "civilisation" into public debate. This term initiated a new way of thinking about Europe, wherein Western Europe was the measure of civilisation. The idea of civilisation was a key reference point that enabled the articulation of the idea of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. According to this theory, Western Europe was the inventor not only of Eastern Europe, but also of itself (Wolff 2020: 28).

We may therefore speak here of the application of an Orientalist discourse to part of the European continent. However, there is an important difference from Edward Said's original version of Orientalism. In his book *Orientalism*, Said writes that the West adopted the concept of the Orient as something entirely different from the West, as a subject that lies outside Europe – not only in a geographical sense – and thus defined Europe's borders (Said 2005). Wolff's concept of Eastern Europe is similar, but not identical. The relationship between Western and Eastern Europe is semi-Oriental: we cannot say that Eastern Europe was perceived as something outside Europe – rather it was considered partially European.

How was the term "civilisation" understood? In the eighteenth century, civilisation denoted an advanced level of material, intellectual and moral development; it was the culmination of human progress (Malia 1999: 27–28). Barbarism, in turn, was viewed as its antithesis. On the scale between barbarism and civilisation, the inhabitants of Eastern Europe were not complete barbarians, but nor were they fully civilised. Eastern Europe, under that interpretation, had the potential to become more Western through progress in certain areas of life. However, a key feature of this civilising process was not persuasion, but rather the imposition of certain standards from outside. A good example of this way of thinking is supplied by Voltaire, who was fascinated by Peter the Great and later by Catherine the Great. Voltaire saw them as philosopher-rulers who were bringing civilisation to the East – and that fact, in his eyes, justified the violence that they employed (Wolff 2020: 319–380; Malia 1999: 42–50).

The notion of Central Europe changed the region's symbolic geography, but not instantly. To begin with, as we know, the term served primarily as a concept in German foreign policy. The idea of *Mitteleuropa* gained currency as a result of Friedrich Neumann's book of 1915. Although Neumann was a liberal, and his attitude to the nations living between Germany and Russia distinguished him favourably from the more aggressively inclined German politicians, the

German *Mitteleuropa* denoted a sphere of German economic and political hegemony (Meyer 1955: 194–217).

After the Second World War, the countries that came under Soviet dominance were generally referred to as Eastern Europe, and this term became synonymous with the Soviet bloc. As Piotr Wandycz noted ironically, "the subordination of this region to the Soviet Union obtained, one might say, a historical justification. For it appeared that the individual countries, somehow unable to exist independently, became, in accordance with their historical destiny, a part of the communist empire led by Russia" (Wandycz 1995: 12). Important scholarly works by such authors as Oskar Halecki, attempting to establish criteria for the division of Europe that were founded in solid academic knowledge, although inspiring for some researchers, did not change the status of the debate or the notions used therein (Halecki 2002).

Changes to the region's symbolic geography arose from essays by leading intellectuals from this part of Europe: Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, and György Konrád. It is thanks to them that the notion of Central Europe, with a positive semantic range, was introduced permanently into the language of politics and culture. Particularly an essay by the first of those listed, titled *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, echoed widely and remains today a standard work of the subject literature. Although the author would distance himself from it, it remains an important reference point in discussions on the topic. There is no need to give a detailed analysis of his position. I wish merely to highlight those features of Central Europe identified by Kundera that direct our attention towards quite different aspects of the region's identity. Kundera distinguishes Central Europe from Russia – in not only its communist incarnation, but also that of the nineteenth century. He rejects the view that there exist cultural connections between the nations of that region and Russia; he refers to Slavophilia contemptuously as a "political phantasmagoria" (Kundera 1984; Bobrownicka 1995: 91–100).

Three points in Kundera's essay are of notable importance for the identity of Central Europe. First, Kundera believed that Central Europe preserved a concept of culture characteristic of European modernism. Just as in the Middle Ages the main reference point for Europeans had been religion, in modern times it was culture that had become the sphere of life in which the matters of greatest importance for the human condition were discussed. In that region especially, owing to the experiences of communism and fascism, this kind of thought became a matter of exceptional importance. The second question was that of the understanding of a political community. In contrasting the way the Russians understood the notion ("the least variation on the greatest possible territory") with

the Central European understanding ("the greatest variation on the smallest possible territory"), Kundera perceived a radical difference. Indeed, he believed that the Europeans in Central Europe retained the sense of contingency in history. The nations of that part of Europe, knowing the experience of existential threat, continued to feel the tragicality of history and the fragility of their own survival. Similarly to the Hungarian historian István Bibó, Kundera emphasised this profound dimension of the experience of the small Central European nations. They have a fear, deeply coded in their own historical memory, that their existence is constantly under threat (cf. Bibó 2012).

Postcolonialism or a return to Europe?

After the fall of communism, that positive sense of the experiences of the nations that had freed themselves from Soviet domination was also noticed by outside observers. Sympathising with those nations' aspirations, they believed that their experiences might provide a desirable adjustment to Western democracy. A good example is Thomas L. Pangle, a leading American political philosopher, who believed that Western democracy was in a state of crisis and in need of revival. He sought the source of such a revival in, among other things, reflection on the subject of the experiences of communism in the works of intellectuals from that part of Europe, which he saw as an antidote to Western relativism and the banalisation of public debate. "In Eastern Europe the divine spark has a presence that for too long has been missing in the West: thought is serious, evil has a meaning, heroism makes demands. Three reservoirs of human depth—love of country, religion, and art—still brim with juices of life that are becoming scarcer in the West" (Pangle 1992: 87).

In evaluations of the significance of the experiences of countries in the region, that point of view did not find widespread acceptance. The intellectuals who supported the transformation tended to view the distinctness of that part of Europe exclusively in categories of backwardness. "In returning to the European structures," Bronisław Geremek wrote of the Polish experience, "we must be aware of our culturally peripheral nature, but at the same time remember that in the past millennium there were moments – sometimes quite long-lasting – when Poland was an important element of the world of European civilisation" (Geremek 2013: 89). A consequence of the adoption of such perspectives was the imitative nature of the transformations, both in Poland and in other countries of the region, which gave rise to frustration among some of the intellectual and political elites.

Analysing the political transformations in Poland after 1989, Zdzisław Krasnodębski noted that the model the Poles had chosen to imitate was a reduced version of contemporary liberalism, absolutising individual freedom and the state's axiological neutrality, and marked by a distrust of strong group identities. In questions of key importance for the countries of the region, such as settling accounts with the past or the place of religion in public space, solutions were imposed – in the name of liberalism – that led to impoverishment of the public sphere. Instead of drawing on their own rich political traditions – the "democracy of the nobility" or the Solidarity movement – which offered an axiologically more valuable version of freedom, the Poles created a "democracy of the periphery" (Krasnodębski 2005). In a similar spirit, conservative historian Andrzej Nowak argues that colonialism, understood in a cultural sense, has been rejected only in relations between the former colonial powers and non-European nations: "It is not permissible today to claim that someone's culture, for example, that of African or Asian countries, is worse or lower. That is outlawed. But not in relation to all: a colonial political culture can most certainly be implemented… within Europe." Thus, in many countries of the European Union, an attitude acknowledging the existence of a kind of internal colony is still present and approved. In that author's view, the countries of East Central Europe are constantly shamed, scolded, and subjected to re-education. They have been placed in the role of a pupil whose role ought to be limited to mastering the lessons given by more civilised nations; they are not expected to produce anything original (Nowak 2021). The conservative Márton Békés, one of the creators of Hungarian memory policy, takes a similar view: "Thirty years after the fall of communism one can say confidently that internationalism itself is alive and well, except that it has taken on different forms (globalisation, the 'open society'), and the logic of colonialism remains an integral part of its arsenal" (Békés 2021).

Attitude to Europe – now often reduced primarily to attitude to the European Union – is one of the most important indicators of ideological orientation in the countries of East Central Europe. It is a persistent element in discussions of ideology in this part of Europe. In the past, however, this dispute often took the form of a discussion between Occidentalism and anti-Occidentalism. In many countries there are examples of a kind of ideological nativism – an affirmation of that which is home-grown in contrast to that which is Western. Štúr's movement in Slovakia, Hungarism in Hungary, Sarmatism in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth – these are examples (although clearly different in many respects) of attempts to build a nation's own identity in opposition to, or at least with the retention of independence from, the West.

At present, however, one may note a significant difference from these older ideological orientations. Contemporary conservatives or nationalists usually consider themselves Europeans, people of the West; their objection to the ideological tendencies manifested within the European Union grows out of the conviction that it is the modern Western European countries that are abandoning European values. Moreover, they question the very opposition of local versus European.

In Polish debates, this position was formulated by the renowned conservative essayist and poet Paweł Hertz. In his view, Poland always belonged to Europe; there is no non-European Polish culture. He saw as a great mistake the attempt to contrast Polishness with Europeanness:

> The sin against the notion of Europe is the idea that it is possible somehow to belong to it directly, bypassing membership of a specific national community, bypassing the obligation to work on those issues that are crucial for that community. This is a sin of ahistoricity, the lack of a sense of history, namely the casting off of a genealogy without which the notion of Europeanism becomes empty snobbery, a fashion, a whim (Hertz 1997: 100).

In this view, the affirmation of Polishness is not merely something consistent with Europeanness, but is a necessary condition for it.

This attitude of presenting oneself as a defender of true European values in the face of the opinions of the dominant political forces in Europe has been noticed by political scientists who disfavour the anti-liberal turn in East Central Europe. In the view of Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, the people of that region felt themselves fully to be Europeans even before Brussels began the project of their "Europeanisation", and that project was thus taken to be unnecessarily offensive (Krastev, Holmes 2020: 69). The same authors note with irony that the former peripheries of Europe are now styling themselves on its centre (ibidem: 70).

The trouble with liberalism

In debates on the subject of the transformations in East Central Europe, much has been made in recent years of the notion of illiberal democracy. Of course, the term is not new – it gained popularity thanks to Fareed Zakaria, who even in the late 1990s was observing with unease the spread of that type of political regime. Zakaria refers to modern liberal democracies as mixed regimes, in which the most valuable element is liberalism, which he sees as encompassing constitutionalism, the division of powers, and guarantees of

individual freedoms. From his standpoint, government by the majority and elections are of lesser value (Zakaria 2003: 26).

Until the time of the famous speech by Viktor Orbán in 2014, the term had been used with a pejorative meaning. Orbán helped to assign it a new semantic range. He questioned the view that liberalism is the most valuable component of contemporary Western political systems. In his view, there is no reason to identify liberalism with freedom. A key issue, however, is the inability of liberal systems to carry out policies in accordance with the national interest. Orbán's position was not simply a reversal of Zakaria's. The latter referred to a debate well known from the history of political ideas, alluding to the praise of modern freedom in the dispute with contemporary advocates of ancient democracy (see Constant 1991). Orbán, in turn, referred to concrete issues familiar from Hungarian experiences since 1989. In his interpretation, the key issue for liberalism is the principle that one person's freedom ends where another's begins. In the reality of post-communist Hungary, that principle became a justification for a system where "might makes right". He gave as an example the situation in the banking market, where large banks took advantage of such freedom to dictate terms to customers. In the light of that interpretation, it is thus hard to speak of equality (*Victor Orbán's speech…* 2014).

A second question is the activity of what is called the third sector. Orbán's critics see that sector as building a civil society, thereby realising the liberal ideal of an intermediate sphere between the individual and the state. Liberals believe that a characteristic of populists is an aversion to civil society. A well-known proponent of such a view is the liberal political scientist Jan Werner Müller. In his book *What is Populism?* he argues that "the opposition from within civil society creates a particular moral and symbolic problem: it potentially undermines [the populists'] claim to exclusive moral representation of the people. Hence it becomes crucial to argue (and supposedly 'prove') that civil society isn't civil society at all, and that what can seem like popular opposition has nothing to do with the proper people" (Müller 2017: 78).

According to Orbán, that sector consists of organisations engaged in influencing governments; they mislead public opinion by claiming political independence. In fact, they are organisations run by unelected politicians, financed by politically engaged entities. Thus, from Orbán's standpoint, the liberal ideal of civil society is merely an ideological justification for specific political interests, serving as an underhand form of political struggle.

Liberalism has been a disappointment to many East Central European writers, and has become an object of criticism. Some see in this the weight of that region's dark past. The rebirth of anti-liberalism is sometimes inter-

preted as evidence of the stubborn persistence of nationalist thought matrices and a political culture that is not adjusted to modern democracy. According to Vladimir Tismaneanu, in interpreting the post-communist ideological landscape, one needs to remember the old axiom *ex nihilo nihil* (nothing comes from nothing): "[…] much of the nationalist pathos is not just the resurrection of interwar right-wing trends, but the prolongation of a xenophobic subculture that lingered under communism (both within and outside the party)" (Tismaneanu 2000: 49).

Other authors believe that the problem is more complex, and that criticism of liberalism cannot be reduced simply to a consequence of the presence of patterns of thought and action that were shaped in the interwar period. Krastev and Holmes, the aforementioned authors of the book *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning,* in evaluating critically the anti-liberal turn in East Central Europe, see the problem in modern liberalism itself. They write that ideological supremacy has "conferred such normative legitimacy on Western institutional forms as to make copying them, for those able to do so, seem obligatory" (Krastev, Holmes 2020: 14).

The proper context for this anti-liberal turn, therefore, is the character of the transformations of Western ideas, institutions and practices. Liberalism has rejected pluralism in favour of hegemony (ibidem: 16), which provoked an objection. The authors go on to claim that such a reaction to a world devoid of political and ideological alternatives was probably inevitable. They see this "absence of alternatives", and not the "gravitational pull of an authoritarian past or historically ingrained hostility to liberalism", as the best explanation for the dominance of an anti-Western ethos in post-communist societies today (ibidem: 14).

Leaving aside the questionable claim of the dominance of an "anti-Western ethos" in post-communist societies, it is worthwhile to pay attention to this voice in the discussion of liberalism in East Central Europe. Liberals themselves, writing from various perspectives, also note the problematic status that liberalism has gained in that region. A liberalism which in the eyes of many of its supporters is an internally rich and diverse current in political thought has transformed into something resembling a mandatory doctrine, and any objection to it is taken as a completely irrational position. This is reflected in the ritual and somewhat fictional character of political life in the post-communist states. Krastev and Holmes observe, while keeping things in proper proportion, that the transformative style of imitation of political systems disturbingly resembles the parliamentary elections held in communist times, when "voters, overseen by party officials, pretended to 'choose' the only candidates who were running for office" (ibidem: 18).

The political transformations in East Central Europe took place under the slogan of a "return to Europe" following decades of forced separation. Accession to the European Union could be read as the final break with communism, and liberalism seemed to many writers to be the natural opposite of communism (Szacki 1994). However, some critics of liberalism believe that it exhibits many disturbing similarities to communism. Ryszard Legutko, Polish conservative philosopher and politician from the Law and Justice party (PiS), claims that this similarity applies not to some warped contemporary form of liberalism, but to liberalism as such. He thus rejects the view that great diversity exists within liberalism or that there are some liberal traditions that have been forgotten (cf. Rosenblatt 2018). Liberalism, in its triumph, revealed its nature. What is this similarity, in Legutko's view?

> Socialism and liberal democracy turned out to be wholes that unite everything, that tell their supporters how to think, what to do, how to evaluate events, what to dream of, what language to use. They had their favourite human types and their model of an ideal citizen (Legutko 2017: 10).

Therefore, since the fall of communism, in place of a triumph of authentic diversity, we have observed the invasion of new formulas that standardise thought and behaviour. "Liberal democracy is a powerful unifying mechanism, blurring the differences between people, imposing a uniformity of views, behaviours, and language" (ibidem: 11). Legutko considers it an error to treat liberalism (and its constitutional incarnation) as a complete opposite of communism in terms of interference in individuals' lives. This remark may come as something of a surprise, because the liberals' programme contains the principle of limited authority and division of powers. It is the classical liberals – John Locke, Montesquieu, and Constant, to name a few – who made the fundamental contribution to the development of that doctrine (see Legutko 2011). Liberals also warned against other threats to the freedom of the individual that appeared in the epoch of mass society: the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" (John Stuart Mill) and the tyranny of public opinion (Alexis de Tocqueville). Contemporary liberalism, according to Legutko, has a different face. We can witness the delegitimising of ideas and practices that lack a liberal–democratic provenance: "the political system should penetrate every element of collective and private life […] Not only the state and the economy should be liberal, democratic or liberal–democratic, but the whole of society, including ethics and mores, the family, churches, human attitudes, schools and universities, organisations and the community, and also culture" (ibidem: 38). For Legutko, there is a striking similarity

between communism and liberalism in their approach to history. Both of them grow out of the adoption of an optimistic, future-oriented vision of history. "Both systems clearly cut themselves off from the past. A natural approach – resulting chiefly from faith in *techne* – is to think in categories of progress, with all of the consequences of that" (ibidem: 17). He also sees a similarity in that "communism and liberal democracy are regarded by their supporters as optimum and final systems: both were to constitute an end to history understood as a sequence of systemic transformations" (ibidem: 75). Thus, the idea of the end of history should not be viewed as a mere fashion. In Legutko's interpretation, it is one of the pillars of the existing political orthodoxy.

The negative assessment of the shape of liberal democracy has a direct connection with the criticism of today's European Union. "Just as the Soviet Union was once painted as the vanguard of progress, so now that role has been ascribed to the 'West', often meaning the United States, or sometimes the European Union. We are left to follow in their footsteps" (ibidem: 72). Liberal democracy thus did not release the creativity of previously enslaved societies, but imposed on them a comprehensive vision to imitate, which – to Legutko's disappointment – those nations accepted. The Polish author complains: "We did not therefore invent a single institution, a single custom, or a single solution. Everything that was done in our countries – in education, the law, the political system, the media, civil society – was an imitation of those who had come before us" (ibidem: 72–73).

What is the place for the European Union in that interpretation? Legutko says that it recreated the liberal–democratic order at supranational level. In contrast to those who see the European Union as an embodiment of a multinational bureaucracy that restricts all kinds of freedom (especially economic), Legutko views it as a legally binding creation of liberalism:

> The doctrine in force in the European Union states explicitly that it is the final system, representing the emanation of "European values", being the crowning of the history of the European nations, requiring absolute defence and intensification. This doctrine is accompanied by the practice of building successive levels of control and regulation, detailed legislation and judicature (ibidem: 111–112).

Accession to the European Union not only failed to create conditions for authentic debate about the future, for free discussion on the principles constituting the political system in European countries, but it led to the imposition of intellectual conformism. Asking certain questions and stating certain opinions became suspicious in the light of the new orthodoxy. The author writes with bitterness:

All of this serves to deepen the impression that the debate about political systems that has carried on in Europe for two-and-a-half millennia has reached an end, and that it has been definitively decided not only at an intellectual level or at the level of a particular state, but on the scale of a continent, or in fact the entire globe, because the Union has become the highest arbiter assessing all political phenomena in the world, and – like the Soviet Union at one time – the hope of oppressed peoples on all continents (ibidem: 112).

We should add, for fairness, that Legutko is naturally aware of the difference between the USSR and the EU. The source of his concern, and the motivation of the comparison, is the tendency to insist on uniformity, as manifested in many areas of life.

The trouble with the nation

The end of communism in East Central Europe was interpreted in different ways. For liberals, it signified above all the obtaining of individual freedom. Another important thread in the discussion was the restoration of national sovereignty. Since in modern democracy the people are usually identified with the nation, the regaining of national sovereignty was understood as synonymous with democracy. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, we have been faced for some time with, firstly, the separation of the notions of democracy and the sovereignty of the nation, and secondly, a distrust towards national identity. A new phenomenon to appear is that of democracy without a nation (Manent 2009).

As noted by the previously cited Jan Werner Müller, the architects of the post-war Western European order viewed the ideal of national sovereignty with great distrust: "How could one trust people who had brought fascists to power or extensively collaborated with fascist occupiers?" (Müller 2017: 134). Consequently, distrust towards unlimited national sovereignty, or even unlimited parliamentary sovereignty is somehow built into the DNA of post-war European politics (ibidem: 135). Müller sees justification for this distrust. The project of European integration grows out of the assimilation of such a vision by European politicians. He writes that European integration was a component part of this overall attempt to limit the national will: adding limitations at a supranational level to those that existed at national level (ibidem).

Frank Furedi, a British sociologist with Hungarian roots, who actively supports the Hungarian position in European discussions, nonetheless observes that the memory of the experiences of the Second World War, and especially of the Holocaust, is used instrumentally. The crimes committed then are treated as delegitimising national identity as such (Furedi 2017: 54). Support

has been gained for the interpretation of nationalism as presented in Carlton Hayes' classic essay *Nationalism as a Religion*, according to which nationalism has become the irrational equivalent of religion (ibidem: 51). Supporters of this view refer to the radical revision of old formulas of identification and the creation of new types of identity. Furedi cites Ulrich Beck, who argued that politics should be deterritorialised, and identity denationalised. Until recently, the dominant way of thinking about politics, in which the most important concepts were the nation, the nation state, sovereignty, and borders, has been rejected. The new quality of the European Union is to be based on, among other things, the replacement of these categories with new ones. The highest value in the new European canon is now diversity, to which the nation state is perceived as an obstacle. Furedi says that diversity is acquiring a status close to sacredness (ibidem: 69).

Advocates of diversity criticise nationalism for falsifying the question of human identity. They argue that a person is composed of different overlapping identities. Moreover, identity is not something fixed, but rather has a fluid character. The false vision of identity as something fixed and undifferentiated, according to Jan Werner Müller, lies at the foundations of contemporary right-wing populism. He believes that today's populists promote a vision of a homogeneous nation, which is a fantasy.

Defenders of the traditional concept of national identity reply in turn that the fantasy is the belief that there is written in national identity an undifferentiated, homogeneous concept of a community. Those who have made diversity the highest political value seek to question the types of identity that assume something fixed in them. Müller believes that a people (or nation) with an established identity that can be articulated through a system of representation is a fiction created by populists. The fluid nature of identity cannot be captured by essentialist formulas. However, Furedi believes that one can identify and represent the "sentiments, interests, traditions, and practices through which a people are constituted" (ibidem: 70). For the defenders of traditional identity, the nation is a value that should be protected. According to the Hungarian historian István Bibó's well-known formula, it is the largest community within which people are capable of communicating without difficulty (ibidem: 73). For the supporters of the new identity, the European Union is a cosmopolitan empire which grows out of the overcoming of national borders and of the egoism that calls to mind the worst pages of history (ibidem: 79). On the one hand this conflict is presented as a clash of particularism with universalism; on the other, it is viewed as a return to a well-known conflict of the past – that between patriotism and imperialism.

The Israeli political scientist Yoram Hazony, author of a book defending nationalism that is also valued in conservative circles in East Central Europe, claims that the conflict between imperialism and nationalism is the most important dispute of our times. In Europe it takes the form of a dispute between those who favour deeper integration and the construction of a new European state, and those who support the preservation of nation states. For Hazony, such phenomena as Brexit, as well as the resistance of East Central European countries to deeper integration, are hopeful manifestations of an awakening of nations (Hazony 2018).

Although liberals usually refer to this phenomenon with disapproval, some of them understand the historical determinants of such an attitude. According to Krastev and Holmes, the countries of East Central Europe are unwilling to accept such a comprehensively negative view of nationalism, firstly because those countries were born "in the age of nationalism following the break-up of multinational empires after the First World War", and secondly because "anti-Russian nationalism played an essential role in the basically non-violent anti-communist revolutions of 1989" (Krastev, Holmes 2020: 89).

In the search for new formulas for the legitimisation of the post-national political order whose emanation is to be the European Union, various ideas are put forward. In such notions as "constitutional patriotism" or "transnational constitutionalism" what comes to the fore is the idea of the rule of law – the will of the people should be replaced by a legal standard. In such a system, a particular role is assigned to the judicature. In the view of György Schöpflin, a Hungarian political scientist and former Fidesz MEP, a dangerous turn has been taken in the European Union regarding the understanding of the role of the judicial branch, and particularly of constitutional courts, in a state's political system. This change is a consequence of a lack of trust in nations. The experience of Germany, where Hitler won democratic elections, left a deep mistrust towards them. The creators of the post-war order decided that democracy needs additional safety measures. A result of this is the strong position of the Federal Constitutional Court within the German political system. In the European Union the quality of democracy is assessed on the basis of the position of constitutional judiciary. The current state of affairs would have no doubt perplexed the advocates of democracy in the nineteenth century – constitutional courts are defending democracy against parliaments. In Schöpflin's view, this has created the problem of the judicial branch's exceeding its defined competences (Schöpflin 2021). He believes that a kind of "outsourcing" of power has taken place – the authority that formerly rested with democratically elected representatives has been transferred to the courts. The centre of gravity of pow-

er has moved from the legislative to the judicial branch. This long-established tendency has intensified as a result of the triple crisis that the EU has experienced in the past two decades: the rejection of the constitutional treaty by key member states, the expansion to the East, and the 2008 economic crisis. Unable to find a way out of this crisis, the Union is more and more often attempting to impose its will. The "consensual *polis*" in which decisions were the subject of consultation has been transformed into a "punitive *polis*". In the European Union, which includes many countries with different institutional and legal traditions, with different ways of regulating the place of the constitutional judiciary in the political system, any attempt to introduce uniformity in that area must lead to arbitrariness. Certain states are reprimanded for measures that are accepted in others (such as the way in which members of constitutional courts are appointed). This leads to a justified sense of frustration and a tendency to regard the decisions of EU institutions as diktats from above (ibidem).

In the discussion on the subject of democracy without a nation, another important thread is the problem of the relationship between the people and the elites that represent them. One of the reasons why East Central European advocates are referred to as populists is that their argumentation frequently contains criticism of elites. It should be noted that, from the perspective of the history of political ideas, this is something of a novelty: formerly it was the conservatives who defended the need for the existence of an aristocracy, and saw in the people a threat to the political order. Now, the advocates of traditional values appeal to the masses and criticise the elites. Criticism of the "new aristocracy" is widespread not only in Europe, but also in the United States (see e.g. Deneen 2021: 194–220).

According to Chantal Delsol, a conservative French thinker who supports the rationale of the adherents of traditional values in East Central Europe, "the suspicion of the European elites towards the peoples is permanent, and comes to light at various turning points in our everyday history. We are democrats. But when the people do not vote as they should (do not accept the European projects that are proposed to them), we make them vote again until they give their consent" (Delsol 2020: 218). Commenting on the words of former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who said that "there can be no democratic choice against the European treaties", Delsol writes: "The European project is thus situated outside democracy, above the voice of the peoples" (ibidem: 219). She continues: "It is quite clear that the contemporary development of the technocracy, particularly in the European institutions, is a consequence of the contempt in which the elites hold the excessively conservative populace. It is a long time since we had to deal with such a lack of respect

for the incompetence of the masses, being at the same time an expression of distrust in democracy" (ibidem: 220).

Support from the European political and cultural elites for the European project is seen by critics as a consequence of their striving to free themselves from the limitations imposed by the traditional framework of the nation and the nation state. The English philosopher Roger Scruton, who probably enjoyed greater renown in the countries of East Central Europe than in his own country (Brzechczyn 2021), writes of the Western elites' "oikophobia". Patriotism and an attachment to one's native culture become the object of criticism and simple mockery. This is manifested, in Scruton's view, in the academic "culture of repudiation" which instructs one to view traditional identities with suspicion, and has developed a whole discourse based on the deconstruction, demythologisation and moral condemnation of its own tradition (Scruton 2006: 23–25).

Attitudes to the nation are revealed in the course of various discussions. It will be worthwhile to draw attention to two issues that are significant in this context. The first is the attitude to the past, as expressed in historical policy. The second is the attitude to immigration. Frank Furedi writes disapprovingly that rejection of the past is something that unites the various factions of supporters of further European integration (Furedi 2017: 79). In his view, Europeans treat their own history not as a foundation on which their collective life can be built, but as something from which they ought to liberate themselves (ibidem: 80). The attitude to history in East Central Europe is different from that which dominates in Western Europe. Western Europeans often refer to their own past with a feeling of shame, resembling the phenomenon that Pascal Bruckner called the "tyranny of guilt"; the people of East Central Europe are divided on this question, but many of them still speak of pride in their own past. The European Union's memory policy is oriented towards promoting a transnational past, or even – as Furedi argues – an anti-national past (ibidem: 81). Furedi sees in EU leaders' way of thinking a kind of teleological understanding of history: the transition from nation state to European federation is treated as some sort of historical necessity (ibidem: 84). He regards the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas as an exponent of the new way of understanding European identity. For the latter, a break with history is a moral imperative. The central event in the history of Europe is taken to be the Holocaust, which Habermas interprets as the second fall of man. The duty to break with the continuity of history results from the acknowledgement that it is worthy of condemnation (ibidem: 85). Furedi argues that the Holocaust is being used as an instrument in the battle with Eurosceptics. Opponents of deeper European

integration are presented as creating the danger of a return to the worst pages of history. This new policy of memory, where the central question is attitude to the Holocaust, is treated as a test of Europeanness for East Central Europe (ibidem: 92).

The immigration crisis has brought to light in dramatic fashion the differences of opinion as to the understanding of such notions as the nation, belonging, and identity. The "counterrevolutionaries" – as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes call the opponents of liberalism from East Central Europe – see the weakness of the West as lying in the inability to treat seriously the difference between the nation and people who do not belong to the nation; hence the lack of understanding of the need to strengthen the territorial borders, which after all give a practical meaning to the distinction between "ours" and "foreign" (Krastev, Holmes 2020: 56). The unwillingness of countries in East Central Europe to accept immigrants is seen as a manifestation of xenophobia, moral immaturity, and inability to create a new type of political community not based on a homogeneous identity. The opponents of such an assessment claim that faith in the possibility of harmonious and peaceful coexistence by representatives of different cultures is naive, and that the history of immigrants in Western Europe shows that a multicultural society is highly unstable. Cultural differences often concern the most important values, and it is difficult to form a community with people from whom so much divides us. Besides issues relating to risks to security resulting from the mass inflow of immigrants, a fundamental argument put forward by the opponents of immigration is the problem of the protection of cultural identity.

Conclusion

The dispute analysed here is an example of a kind of discussion typical of post-Enlightenment culture, which reveals a difference in professed values. Even if the disputing parties use similar notions, they assign them a different semantic range. In the views taken of the difference between East Central Europe and the rest of the European Union, one can observe the presence of old ideas, dating back to the Enlightenment, about the failure of countries in that region to fulfil all European standards. The differences are given a pejorative connotation and are treated in categories of backwardness. In critics' eyes, the countries of the region have not learnt the lesson of twentieth-century history, and their way of thinking about such matters as the nation, the nation

state, sovereignty, and historical memory is not only anachronistic, but creates a danger of a return to an inglorious past.

In turn, in the voices of the defenders of East Central Europe – those from that region, and intellectuals from the West who sympathise with them – we hear disapproval for the way that region is treated by Western European countries and EU institutions. They believe that the issues they raise are ignored, they encounter a refusal to enter into discussion, and instead, efforts are made to suppress their voices by administrative means. Paradoxically, the region's advocates believe that they are better Europeans than their critics from the West; they are defending not so much an anachronistic concept of political order, but that which was valuable in European tradition.

What is the way out of this situation? It may be described with reference to the title of Albert Hirschman's classic work *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, naturally treating the notions mentioned in that title in a flexible manner.

Firstly, the dispute may prove to be a transient one. The ideological position of the states of East Central Europe may change following elections in individual countries, causing them to join the main current in European politics, at the same time consigning the aforementioned dispute to history. Thus, these states may remain loyal members of the European Union, revising their own position on fundamental matters.

Secondly, the dispute may be prolonged, deepening divisions within the European Union. The countries of East Central Europe may find allies among other EU members, and the problems that they raise may no longer be treated as a troublesome characteristic feature of that region, but as an alternative conception of European politics.

Finally, in a third scenario, in spite of the repeated declarations by the region's political leaders that they wish to remain within the European Union, and public support for membership of that organisation, if both sides toughen their positions, then those countries may leave the Union, or else attain a status whereby their membership has a purely formal character.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the discussion concerning the place of East Central Europe in the European Union. The author focuses on issues related to political axiology. Analysing the statements of selected authors and politicians, mostly from Poland and Hungary, he tries to determine what values are at stake in this dispute. In the author's view, the two fundamental areas of discussion are the attitude towards liberalism, and the future of the nation and the nation state. The article ends with a forecast of the possible consequences of this dispute.