

## Editorial: Focus on Central and Eastern Europe

Guest editor:  
Zoltán BRETTER\*

Instead of writing a whole study on the importance, specificity, uniqueness of the subject matter of this *Special Issue: Focus on Central and Eastern Europe*, I am going to recommend the issue with a longer quotation, from an essay written by István Bibó, during WWII:

...the nations in this region lacked what was self-evidently, clearly, circumscribable, and graspable present in both the reality and the consciousnesses of West European communities—the reality of their own national and state frameworks, their capital cities, their being politically and economically accustomed to one another, a single social elite, etc. The political rise and decline of a country in Western and Northern Europe—its acquiring or losing a role as a major power or its establishing or losing a colonial empire—could remain episodic, distant adventures, pleasant or sad memories, and could be suffered without major shocks because there was something that could not be taken away or questioned. In Eastern Europe, in contrast, the national frameworks were something to be fashioned, restored, fought for, and be anxious about not only because of the overpower of the state framework of existing dynasties, but also because of the indifference of certain quarters of its population and the fickleness of national consciousness. This is the situation that gave rise to a characteristic feature of the unbalanced Central-East European political mentality: existential anxiety for the community. East European nations were always overshadowed by alien, rootless state powers either bearing European forms or wielding unbearable pressure, whether they were called emperor, tsar, or sultan, who deprived them of their sons either by offering the most talented ones a career or sending the most upright ones to the gallows or jails. The mismatches between historical and ethnic borders soon brought bad blood among the peoples themselves, and given the opportunity, they tried out on one another what they had learned from the emperors, tsars, or sultans. They all got to know the feeling when alien powers endangered, seized, or ruled their sacred places of national

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\*Zoltán BRETTER is associate professor at the University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary; e-mail: bretter.zoltan@pte.hu. ORCID: 0000-0002-3039-1984

history and suppressed or governed their people in whole or in part. They all had territories for which they were justified in being anxious or in claiming, and all have been close to partial or full destruction. “The death of the nation” or “the annihilation of the nation” rings empty in West European ears; Westerners can imagine extermination, subjection, or slowly going native, but political “annihilation” overnight is sheer bombast to them, yet it is a palpable reality for the nations of Eastern Europe. [...] Existential anxiety for the community has been the decisive factor in making democracy and democratic development waver in these countries. There is one essential requirement for the modern political development of a European community to be harmonious and even—that the cause of the community and the cause of liberty be one cause. In other words, in the revolutionary moment, when great revolutionary shock frees the individual from the psychic pressure of the social forces ruling over him by the grace of God, it should be obviously clear that the liberation of the individual means also the liberation, unfolding, and inner and outer enrichment of the *entire community*. Democracy and nationalism are movements with the same root, profoundly related, and their imbalance can be the cause of grave confusions. And grave confusions did arise in Central-East Europe. A taking possession of the national community and the liberation of the people did not intertwine; quite to the contrary, these nations experienced historical moments that seemed to prove that the collapse of the oppressive political and social powers of the past and the carrying of democracy unrelentingly to its logical conclusion jeopardized, even brought disaster to the national community. These shocks brought into being the greatest monstrosity of modern European political development: *antidemocratic nationalism*. Sadly, we have become so much used to it that we do not take notice what a squaring of the circle it is to expect and develop the characteristic features of free men, the spontaneous enthusiasm, conscious self-sacrifice, and responsible activism for a community while that community fails to guarantee the elemental conditions for the growth of free men. In a state of convulsive fear and the belief that the advance of freedom endangers the cause of the nation, the benefits of democracy cannot be made use of. *To be a democrat is first and foremost not to be afraid*—not to be afraid of those who have a different opinion, speak a different language, and are of another race; not to be afraid of revolution, conspiracies, the unknown evil intentions of the enemy, hostile propaganda, disdain, and generally all those imaginary dangers that become real because we are afraid of them. The countries of Central East Europe have been afraid because they are not full-fledged and mature democracies, and being afraid, they were unable to become democracies. The unfolding of an undisturbed, free, and unafraid political life would have run straight against the very anxiety complexes of these nations; it would have upset a war effort, disabled the pursuit of an

aggressive foreign policy born of fear, unmasked the sham political construct the national anxiety erects, or provided too great an opportunity for national minorities threatening national unity and feeling alien in or unconcerned or inimical about the national framework, and so on. (István Bibó, “The Miseries of Small East European States”:in *The Art of Peacemaking – Political Essays* I. Z. Dénes, Ed.; P. Pásztor, Trans. Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 149-152.)

I would dare to conjecture that the whole future of Europe rests on whether we can stop squaring the circle in Eastern and Central Europe.

In this special issue, the authors address the most diverse and pressing problems of Central and Eastern Europe in a comparative perspective which, indeed, was the major requirement for the articles to be admitted for peer review. Other, highly interesting, valuable articles were also submitted, which were referred to any regular issue of EJES.

As the Guest Editor of this *Special Issue: Focus on Central and Eastern Europe*, of *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, I would like to express my solidarity and deepest sympathy with the Ukrainian academic community. I know that in these terrible hours, days and now months, in the midst of a war that has caused senseless destruction, academics, researchers, professors have sought to preserve the source of human dignity, the freedom to create. As editor, I have called on the other authors, where possible, to reflect, even if only in a sentence or two, on the impact that the current war may have on the future of Europe more broadly, and of Central and Eastern Europe more narrowly. Obviously, the aim of the research cannot be to assess the current situation, but it can be to make predictions, and although the writing of the published studies began before the war broke out, the authors readily complied with my request, which I interpret as a declaration of solidarity.

While *Andrea Schmidt* also touches upon present day events when taking into consideration the new realities after the Cold War, her focus, as that of *Leszek Nowak*, is the identity of Central Europe. Both authors reflect on imaginary geography retelling the various and ever-changing narratives in which Central Europe places its own, conceived as, special identity.

Broadening *Andrea Schmidt*'s perspective, *Christopher Walsh* examines in detail the relations of the V4 countries with each other and with other countries, from which a proteian picture seems to emerge.

The other articles examine key issues and public policies in Central and Eastern Europe.

*Emin Efecan Aktaş* demonstrates that corruption contributes to rising income inequality. From this, we can then venture the assumption that the chances of a welfare state and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe remain limited due to corruption and the increase in income inequality.

As the state and potential of civil society are crucial for the democratic future of the Central and Eastern European region, it is no coincidence that several studies have addressed the various problems of civil society. *Jānis Kapustāns* examines three Baltic countries from the point of view of European self-consciousness - Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia - and confirms our assumption that in these countries there is a very high level of acceptance of EU membership. By using statistical data, *László Kákai and Agnieszka Bejma* would explore two other cases, that of Hungary and Poland, where civil society seems to be in regress despite the leading role of civil activity played in the regime changes of 1988-89.

Among one of the major public policies, maternity leave and maternity benefits are investigated in detail by *Danuta Duda, Kamila Turečková, Ivona Buryová, Radka Kubalová* by pointing out the differences among the V4 countries.

Populism is a phenomenon that has been of interest to many researchers of the late?, and this special issue should not be lacking the attempt to understand populism. *Petr Just and Jakub Charvát* examine, in the case of the Czech Republic and Poland, whether the upper house of parliament can provide sufficient safeguards against democratic backsliding. *Zoltán Bretter*, on the other hand, provides a theoretical foundation for authoritarian populism while trying to justify his theory with the cases of Romania and Hungary.

A somewhat more global perspective on CEE countries is given by two articles.

*Péter Kacziba and Barış Hasan* examine the specific geopolitical situation of the countries on the EU's eastern front and the resulting foreign policy options.

Last, but not least, with *Zoltán Vörös's* paper, we get a glimpse on both the science of futurology and the near distant future of CEE countries as well.

As a kind of conclusion to this editorial note, let me reiterate that I think I speak from the heart of all of us, authors of this Special Issue, when I wish for the academic community of the world, our Ukrainian colleagues, that this war, fought not only in Central and Eastern Europe, this almost unbelievable atrocity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would end as soon as possible, so that we could return to peaceful creation.