

**Vision of East Central Europe in the thoughts
of Polish intellectual elites of a 1989 turning point**

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Abstract:

The thesis presented in this article advances that creation of the idea of East Central Europe, which was shaped by the social elite of Central-European nations since the 50s, played an essential role on the turn of 1989. The creation of such idea laid foundations of political talks and treaties on the recognition of borders. It reduced mutual claims and helped avoid conflict of borders and ethnic riots. Discussions between the elite of border nations reduced mutual prejudices and stereotypes, also in the context of relationships between the entire societies. In Poland, the deliberations on the idea of East Central Europe had later determined prerogatives of foreign policy conducted by the first non-communist governments and had become a manifestation of the fact that the country on the Vistula River had always been part of European civilization, separated by the Iron Curtain for several decades of the second half of 20th century.

Key words:

East Central Europe, intellectual elite, intellectuals, transformation, foreign policy

The concept of Europe divided into the East and the West makes both Poles and the nations to the north and south of the Carpathians uncomfortable¹, as the latter would rather be considered to be members of the Centre of the Old Continent than its eastern parts. They prefer to be called 'borderland space' of western European civilization than represent its east, and thus essentially Russian, face. They want this part of Europe to be, as it once was, a meeting place of civilizations, where creative confrontation between conflict and dialogue would often take place. Moreover, it was at that time, when this unique sensitivity to one's national identity

¹ (...) After 1945, an extremely astounding concept of East Europe (instead of Slavic Europe), lying behind the Iron Curtain and basically equated with Russia and the Russian language, became established in the consciousness of the world.' (transl. TP; Kłoczowski 2014: 3)

and the civilization status of communities living in these regions, was shaped. But when the 'Russian East' came closer than ever, and the West turned its back, the Yalta cut led to a paralysis of European identity of the 'countries lying in the continent centre' for nearly 50 years.

The Poles questioned their 'easterness' many times, often against the facts. Until recently, for many observers this part of Europe did not exist, it was an illusion, a usurpation perhaps. Memories of European borderlands were only flashes of the past. Mieszko's (the first historical ruler of Poland and creator of the Polish state) descendants showed, however, that they had all the arguments in their favour, indisputably proven in 1989. It turned out that the Poles, together with other nations hidden behind the Iron Curtain, are able to create the space of freedom². The new reality in the East of Europe after 1989 became not only their salvation, but also a great opportunity. Seeking a method to get rid of the crippling impact of the 'burdensome situation', the Poles, but also the Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Lithuanians and others, at the end of 20th century began to widen the space of freedom and rebuild Europe. In fact, after 1989, the point was not to have Poland back in Europe³ (after all, Poland has been its part for centuries), but quite the opposite: to get Europe back on the Vistula River.

Intellectual elite and East Central Europe

This article, through the analysis of the literature on the subject and historical sources, aims to show the role of the intellectual elites and the ideas they create for raising social awareness or national identity, but also for the state's foreign policy. Paper is focusing on the example of creation of the idea of East Central Europe, which was shaped by the social elite of Central European nations since the 50s, and which played an essential role on the turn of 1989.

For the purpose of this article, the term 'intellectual elite' will be used herein to describe the opposition circles taking part in the Round Table sessions, and later in the creation of the Citizens' Committee with Lech Wałęsa, Chairman of the Independent Self-governing Trade Union, and also Mazowiecki's government, and finally the circles that shaped foreign policy of the first government in free Poland. Why not 'intelligentsia' or 'intellectuals'? So much has been written on the subject of the Polish intelligentsia as a social category that at first glance it

² 'Poland, subjected to the Yalta order, could not until after 1989 participate in the rebirth of European unity. Europe, however, has always remained the Polish dreams of freedom', said Bronisław Geremek during the ceremony of awarding him the International Charlemagne Prize of the City of Aachen on 21 May 1998 (Geremek 1999: 9).

³ These slogans appeared in the press and numerous publications, including academic ones.

may seem that nothing significant can be added. The paradox lies in the fact that historians and sociologists dealing with this problem in such a great number of publications, to this day have not really agreed on an acute and consistent definition of this category. Often, however, this blurring of semantic distinctions simply reflect chronic vagueness of real divisions, hierarchies and roles; let us raise here, for example, an issue of occupational diversification of intelligentsia, which is reflected in its division into separate segments (Domański 2008: 11-14).

One of these segments is the elite of intelligentsia, usually called the intellectuals. This is a category which we constantly hear and read about, but which is still covered with a veil of secrecy. Despite definitional problems, we know that an educated person is a member of historically formed social group which can be (better or worse) described in terms of sociological or historical categories. An intellectual is not defined in terms of any affiliation (hence his classlessness and Mannheim's (1954) eradication), but rather in terms of the use he makes of his mind, creative abilities or knowledge. It is also important what kind of relationship he has with the world and the surrounding reality. This is the reason why an intellectual seems to escape sociological, economic and historical categories. Moreover, this category suits the description of democratic reality much better: the requirement of democratic freedoms is associated with an educated person's critical attitude, which is not fully possible when freedom of thought and expression is limited by totalitarian reins. This is why we will stick to the term 'elite of intelligentsia' (according to Merton's (1968) concept, intelligentsia is a natural audience of intellectuals called their 'elite'); however, we will refer to such elite as 'intellectual elite' comprising people of culture, its creators and distributors (in the broad sense); because their social and professional situation is similar and because they are aware of their own responsibilities towards the world and neighbours, they grant themselves the right to interfere in the surrounding reality (Micińska 2000).

The elite can be metaphorically presented as a lens or an oil field. The first comparison is to show that the elite are like a magnifying glass focusing the most important features of a given society of which they are the product. According to the second metaphor, the elite are condensed human resources which are at the disposal of each society. Both approaches start from the simple assumption, paraphrasing de Maistre: 'every society gets the elite it deserves'. This matter, however, can be put in another way, namely that there is a gap between the elite and the society: the masses are noted for moral indifference as well as political and civic immaturity. They are

like too much ballast on a dangerously overloaded ship which goes out to the quiet sea only thanks to responsible elite. Here the assumption is slightly modified: 'what elite such a society' (Misztal 2005).

In order to describe the situation at the turn of the last two decades of 20th century in Poland, the use of only second approach, which spontaneously comes to mind, would be abuse. The truth is that during communism the elite generated the elite, their social base was small as whatever came into being in the Second Republic, was lost in the ashes of war and the dark days of Stalinism; there is, however, another side to the coin: after all, it was not only a handful of people who attended protests shouting: 'Solidarity! Solidarity!', or who distributed underground publications, secretly taught the children about the Katyn massacre and even gave up Communist party membership cards. But still, it was this handful that was called on the carpet to the Viceregal Palace (after World War II, the Palace served as the seat of the Council of Ministers) to sit at the big table 'without edges'. The Round Table, completing the Citizens' Committee electoral lists and the way Mazowiecki's government was created, interpreted by some as a kind of 'deal with a group of cronies', reminds rather the old times of 19th century and typical behaviour of the intelligentsia (to take matters into their own hands): 'The Citizens' Committee with Lech Wałęsa was a successful coup of the union workers. The intelligentsia seized power. Citizens' Committees were created in order to build political Poland, not workers' or union Poland. (...) The intelligentsia assumed power in Poland the same way they did in the Second Republic, although the mechanism was different (...) They seized power in Poland totally ignoring social support. The elite seemed to gladly commit gradual suicide, but they managed to achieve what they headed for. The intellectuals knew which Poland they wanted and achieved their goal. (...) They were all anti-political, they believed that there are some higher goals to be achieved regardless of the cost. In this sense, the intelligentsia disappeared, when they should have that is at the end of the transformation. They accomplished the task as Poland somewhat returned to normality, perhaps this normality was not too beautiful, but it rarely is beautiful' (transl. TP; Smolar 2009).

The issue how Polish intellectual elite saw Poland on the map of Europe back then, how (if at all) they wanted to shift their country to the West, from East Europe to Central Europe, seems extremely striking. It is also thought-provoking why the matters of geopolitical and cultural affiliation would be of any interest to them at all. Other very important questions result

from deliberations on East Central Europe such as the question of the purpose of Polishness or national and civilizational identity of the Poles. The system transformation is often the time of exceptional crisis of bonds and values. Side effects of even the most positive changes might generate uncertainty, insecurity, isolation or some kind of identity disorders (historical, cultural, national or political identity – on a macro social scale). Identity, as a changeable value shaped by different experiences, primarily includes two main components: self-definition of an individual and collective self-awareness of a group. These processes take place in two ways: through positive verification (identification with specific ideas, values, socio-cultural groups such as national one) as well as negative verification (separation from others, defining oneself in opposition to 'strangers') (Wolff-Powęska 1998: 313-314).

It is true that the peoples of East Central Europe had regained freedom, but to a large extent – as Wolff-Powęska claimed – they lost their sense of security. The citizens of the Netherlands or Sweden do not have any serious dilemmas associated with their place on Earth. Their roots in particular culture and civilization have in fact never been denied or fought against, and their attachment to confirmed political or moral values has never been called into question (Wolff-Powęska 1998). Such experiences in the era of transformation enhance fears. At the time of change – just like on a road that we do not know – road signs are much needed. Who then, if not the intellectual elite, can set these road signs for those who travel all round the new reality?

It is the elite that give the society a perspective of viewing things. Or, to put it more simply and plainly, the elite call the reality. Moreover, if we consider that social reality is socially structured and only by means of such tools and categories which themselves are subject to such a structure, then everything that we are conceptually experiencing already is, in a certain sense, social reality. Therefore, creating specific concepts based on scraps of ideas and passing them to a wide range of people already accounts for reality creation. The role of the intellectual elite in this perspective takes on a whole new meaning. They not only call the reality, but simply create it. Therefore, this article is an attempt to determine the origin of the vision and ideas of East Central Europe, it's a reference to the thoughts of influential groups, and it will not only be an attempt to get to know the reality, but, one could say, will try to comprehend it.

The questions asked in previous paragraphs are not insignificant also for other countries of East Central Europe, no matter where we would mark out its borders. These questions – about the role of an elite, about setting directions and providing perspectives – are of the interest to all

societies going from socialism to democracy. And the term 'East Central Europe' (or 'Central Europe'), appropriately popularized, plays a very important role. Timothy Garton Ash already mentioned this term in 1987 in *Zeszyty Literackie*, proving that the term of 'East Central Europe' 'reminds an American or British newspaper reader that East Berlin, Prague or Budapest are not quite in the same position as Kiev or Vladivostok and that Siberia does not begin at Checkpoint Charlie. And also, because it suggests American or British students that the study and analysis of this region may be something more than just an annex to kremlinology' (Ash 1987: 26). At the time, when Ash was writing these words, the situation in this part of Europe used to be described as: 'Eastern Europe in actu, Central Europe in potentia' (Ash 1987: 48).

Inspirations: getting through to the elite

Every idea has its progenitors as well as those who later try to put it into practice. The concept of East Central Europe does not have a long tradition, but it originates from certain way of thinking which has been rooted in history for a long time (Kłoczowski 2000). It seems, however, that two concepts could have an impact on Polish intellectual elite of the last two decades of 20th century and the way they perceived central part of the continent. These concepts derived from two different circles, namely Polish historians debating about it before the war, and intellectuals gathered around Paris emigration magazine *Kultura*, the writers of which created pragmatic foundations of foreign policy for future Poland.

The term 'East Central Europe' is not only a geographical, historical or political name; it is a kind of *topos*⁴, inclusive of the whole spectrum of phenomena, yet mainly political, economic and cultural ones. This term appeared for the first time in the mid-20th century, but – as highlighted by Jerzy Kłoczowski (2007) – has its roots in a debate held before the war by groups of historians from countries east to Germany and Italy, the debate organized on Polish initiative (mainly of M. Handelsman and O. Halecki) and chaired by Polish historians in the years 1927-1939 under the aegis of the Federation of Historical Societies of East Europe. This cooperation, however, lasted only until the outbreak of World War II, and after it ended, the Iron Curtain began to erect which prevented members of these respectable influential circles from

⁴ *Topos* (in short the 'key-word'), also known as a place of preference, is a point of view common for specific audience. This is a fundamental figure of speech which organizes the space of discourse – an argumentative scheme, widely recognized in given epistemic community. When one refers to some *topos*, he may expect that it will be immediately approved by such community. *Topoi* thus help consolidate or bring back some visions of reality in the minds of consumers much faster (Perelman 2002: 43-45).

before 1939 from assembling again. The idea survived, but principally in exile. Polish historian Oskar Halecki, who found himself in the post-war years in the United States, began to continue the work he had begun in the country before the war. In 1950 he published a book on European region entitled *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (Halecki 1994), about which Kłoczowski (2004: 5) wrote that it is 'a kind of the conclusion of the movement of international cooperation of historians before 1939 and at the same time an intellectual protest against Soviet domination'. And thus, according to Halecki, the following countries ranked among East Central Europe: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland together with the federated Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which for many centuries was united with Lithuania, Ruthenia (i.e. Ukraine and Belarus), Latvia and part of Estonia. It is also worth noting that Halecki as early as then (in 1950!) mentioned Ukraine and Belarus, hoping for their separation from Russia, as he was convinced that the links of these countries indicate they belong to East Central Europe (Halecki 2000: 131-132).

Halecki's thought was continued in Poland for instance by Jerzy Kłoczowski, who established the Institute of East Central Europe in the first years after regaining freedom (1991), but who propagated his ideas among Polish historians many years before the breakthrough of 1989. As early as in the 70s, and especially in the 80s, in spite of many difficulties, the circles of historians promoted this idea in the form of various publications, projects and a number of conferences, at which such issues as divisions in Europe or Poland's relationships with its neighbours and the whole idea of East Central Europe were discussed. Not to be underestimated are also initiatives opening Poland to the Western world and cooperation with the 'French school' and the so-called 'new history' of the Annales group (Pleskot 2010). Thanks to this, historical research – although taken up in a totalitarian state – was examined and treated in a many-sided way, 'together with many scientific disciplines, always in a broad context and over a long time, thereby at every step inevitably leading to comparisons, to the necessity to go beyond the byways of a small region or country, and thus to a better understanding of one's own past and culture' (Kłoczowski 1993: 28).

Since the early 70s, certain trend in Polish historiography has become noticeable: the medievalists in their broad studies used the term 'East Central Europe' to improve their knowledge of the early Slavic world and the origin of countries from eastern part of Europe; furthermore, they often indicated multiple economic, political and cultural ties with the West as

well as the contacts of early Slavs with the Byzantine Empire in the East. In the end, the experts on modern history began to use this term also with reference to contemporary times (Kłoczowski 1993: 28-29). Back at that time historians used to meet together, for example, at mediaeval meetings that reinforced the sense of Central-European identity⁵. It was then when an attempt to co-operate more closely with the circles of historians of Central-European countries was taken⁶. An event that was the coping stone of these efforts was the congress organized by the Catholic University of Lublin and the Lateran University in Rome on 3-7 November 1981, the theme of which were common historical roots of Christian nations of Europe. On Polish side, the plenary lectures were delivered by A. Gieysztor, J. Kłoczowski and S. Kieniewicz, thereby providing a framework for discussion about Christianity in East Central Europe. This meeting was held under the patronage of Pope John Paul II, who was keenly interested in the subject of Central Europe. As Kłoczowski (2006: 7-8) points out, the Holy Father from the beginning was '(...) our Friend and a Friend of the Federation of Institutes of East Central Europe as well as people from the countries of the region, which, together with freedom they have just regained, have established friendly international cooperation in this part of Europe, so sorely tried in historical terms. The idea of closeness of the peoples who once co-existed for centuries within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which in fact consisted of many nations, was very dear to John Paul II'. In addition to the conference, there was also an evening meeting of a few people well aware of what the situation of Poland and the 'Solidarity' movement was. Bronisław Geremek attended this meeting at that time, answering the questions of John Paul II about the situation in Poland. The meeting took place a month before the imposition of martial law in Poland.

The authority of Pope John Paul II strongly affected both the Polish intellectual elite and the society as a whole, and the Holy Father's involvement in specific projects made them assume great importance and be discussed not only in the narrow circles of historians. The so-called Roman meetings of 1990 and their later consequences, which we will discuss later in this article, were extremely important here. Since the beginning of his pontificate John Paul II repeatedly

⁵ For example, a conference in Krakow in 1976 on St. Stanislaus.

⁶ It is worth paying attention to an atlas of Christianity in Poland and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth drafted by the Institute of Historical Geography of the Church in Poland at the Catholic University of Lublin under the leadership of J. Kłoczowski; the work on the atlas had started in the late 50s, and from the very beginning its authors placed great emphasis on broad, European context of presented phenomena, which was reflected in the fact that towards the end of the 80s the atlas programme was extended to cover the entire East Central Europe (Kłoczowski 1993: 34).

showed that East Central Europe was a special place to him, not only because of its political, geographical or cultural differences, but above all because of the uniqueness of its historical, religious and cultural experiences. According to Łaszkiewicz (2006), the Pope wanted his ideas on East Central Europe to reach to and be understood particularly by people inhabiting these lands. The suffering they endured and the memory of these bitter experiences along with the need for freedom and human rights defence remain to this day an exceptional strength that these nations bring to the European heritage.

It should also be noted that Central-European tradition of Polish historians, supported by John Paul II, is so characteristic also due to the fact that many of the opposition members, participants of the Round Table sessions, were history graduates (and even academics) – just to mention Bronisław Geremek, Henryk Samsonowicz and Karol Modzelewski, all very active both in the field of science and politics. One of the members of the Civic Committee with Lech Wałęsa, Jerzy Kłoczowski, whom we referred to in the text repeatedly, also had multiple contacts with the opposition. Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń or Aleksander Hall were also history graduates. The influence of environment in which they were growing up probably was not without significance.

The Paris emigration magazine *Kultura*, reaching the Polish elite through underground channels, was also a window on the world for those imprisoned in fetters of the totalitarian state. Interestingly enough, after World War II Jerzy Giedroyc, who settled in exile, strived to create conditions for a long-term political action and did not try to either organize paramilitary structures and combat groups, or create political structures; instead, he established a magazine and publishing house. He was convinced that in the ideological struggle with communism it would be a much more important weapon as it is not enough to oppose force to totalitarianism; it is also necessary to counteract its effects on the Polish elite. In exile, Giedroyc was a pioneer in this kind of thinking (Pomian 2001). This way *Kultura* was a proponent of ideas important to Polish opposition, thereby giving some hope to the suppressed elites. Over the years, the *Kultura* people had developed a programme that had become the foundation (especially when it comes to politics in the East) for future foreign policy of free Poland⁷. As early as at the beginning of the

⁷ 'Giedroyc and Mieroszewski's great intellectual achievement was, therefore, a combination of acceptance of the state borders with the prediction that communism would collapse, and with the awareness that this situation would require new Polish strategy. Developing such strategy and providing grounds for it accounted for their great theoretical achievement, whereas promoting this programme in such a way that the Poles, who since 1989 were to play an important role in politics, considered it to be obvious, was their great political achievement' (Snyder 2006: 255, Cf: Geremek 2001: 97-98).

70s, Juliusz Mieroszewski formulated theoretical justification for Poland's eastern strategy once it shook off its Soviet shackles. He was of the view that individual nations beyond Polish eastern border, that is Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, should be strengthened in the respective Soviet republics. He also supported the idea that all claims to lands lost in 1945 should be given up; he predicted that 20th century would witness the 'Spring of Nations' in Central and Eastern Europe (Mieroszewski 1976: 110-122, 175-186).

According to Snyder (2006), the impact of Mieroszewski on the Polish opposition was very important. The Polish Independence Alliance (Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe, PPN) in its eastern policy kept to the guidelines of the magazine, followed by the Workers' Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR), the members of which attached great importance to eastern neighbours. In 1972, Father Jan Zieja (a co-founder of KOR in 1976) addressed the following words to Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians: 'We forgive and ask for forgiveness' (Kuroń 1989: 347-349). Snyder (2006) points out that the programme of *Kultura* was accepted and taken over by the 'Solidarity', which was an excellent platform through which a view on the nations beyond eastern border reached millions of Poles. This new thinking was reflected in solidarity press articles, in the statements made by activists and, finally, in the resolution of the union convention of 1981 called 'The Message to the Working People of Eastern Europe'. It was not an appeal addressed to the Soviet proletariat, but to the working people of every nation of the Communist bloc. According to an American historian, these were the first moments in modern Polish history, when considerable number of Poles thought about their immediate eastern neighbours, hidden behind Soviet republics, as their equals. Then, throughout the eighties, in many publications and through various initiatives the elite attempted to take up the issues of good relations with eastern neighbours (Snyder 2006). No wonder that in 1989 the need for good relations with neighbouring nations represented a well-thought-out view of larger part of the intellectual elite. It is also interesting that even Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1998) referred to *Kultura* when he was explaining the implementation of his own foreign policy as well as the entire post-communist bloc's which came to power in Poland in 1993.

Before the wall came crashing down

The analysis of political thought of the Polish opposition of the 70s and 80s shows that the issue of East Central Europe was at that time visibly present in underground publications and

considered at various levels (Rogaczewska 2004). It was discussed whether there is a common spiritual culture of Europe, whether the Rhine is actually the borderline between two different cultures and whether Poland, without any doubt, belongs only to one of them. Answers were usually sought in historical events showing the unity of European, or at least Central-European, spirit. However, less attention was paid to the future of this region and to Europe as a whole; the notion that the dominance of the Soviet Union in the east central part of the Old Continent would be long-standing with no real chances for a change prevailed.

According to policy documents of the Polish Independence Alliance founded at the end of 1975 and at the beginning of 1976 by Zdzisław Najder, East Central Europe was the area between three seas: the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black Sea, inhabited by nations clearly defined in historical and cultural terms, unresponsive to foreign domination and homogeneous enough that it was difficult for them to create common political structures. These nations unmistakably share the same historical destiny, the same tragedies and foreign supremacy – first of the three superpowers, then of constitutionally and ideologically super state, which cut off this part of Europe from its western part: 'For centuries shut away from the world, police, and distrustful Russia imposed its political style to Europe as far as the Elbe and Danube' (Rogaczewska 2004: 182). Even then, at the end of the 70s, the members of the Polish Independence Alliance declared that in the east Poland borders on Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, not the Soviet Union; there were also no claims made to Lvov and Vilnius. Furthermore, it was emphasized that free Poland without free Czechs and Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians is simply impossible. People were, however, aware how conflict-ridden this territory was; they knew about its diversity, distrustfulness of one another and hostile attitude of some countries of this part of Europe. Klaus Zimmer (2007) noted an interesting fact, pointing to an article published in the Paris magazine *Kultura* in 1978. It was a kind of Polish Independence Alliance policy statement (Najder was its main author) and it stated that Poland should strive for the unification of Germany (on condition that the Oder-Neisse will be recognized as Poland's western border), which would give our country a direct territorial contact with the West. According to Najder (PPN 1978), the German Democratic Republic was in fact a Soviet satrap and blocked the direct access to the neighbourhood with the West.

These assumptions and ideas were transferred to the Workers' Defence Committee through such persons as Józef Rybicki and Jan Olszewski who were the first members of the Polish Independence Alliance. Other important personages, including Władysław Bartoszewski, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Marcin Król, Jan Józef Lipski, Józefa Hennelowa or Tadeusz Mazowiecki, cooperated with the Alliance. The issue of East Central Europe was constantly present in the opposition underground. Within the 'Solidarity' itself a variety of concepts regarding the unity among Central-European countries kept coming up, like for example the so-called Intermarium concept, which was to guarantee these countries' independence and inviolability of their borders (Mięguszowiecki 1984: 5-7). There were concepts of federation with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Lithuania in the centre (Bądkowski 1980). Not always, however, the idea of the unity of East Central Europe was a goal in itself; sometimes it was only a means helping achieve higher level goal, that is the unification of the whole of Europe⁸. Jacek Kuroń (1985) had different idea, though; he believed that both German republics, Poland and other Central-European countries should make up a demilitarized and neutralized zone under international control. Abandoning the arms race would give the countries of Central Europe the chance to meet their economic needs.

In addition, Central-European issues were undertaken in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Więzi* (Tadeusz Mazowiecki was the latter's editor-in-chief for a long time) and *Znak* – in a specific way, as an attempt to smuggle the thought nonetheless, after numerous censor's deletions – on the pages of which the works of both Polish and, more importantly, foreign historians were frequently published. The Lublin magazine *Spotkania* (Independent Magazine of Young Catholics associated with historians from the Catholic University of Lublin) was also an unusual initiative operating in samizdat (the magazine lived to see its branch in Paris), often undertaking the issues of East Central Europe. No wonder that in the intellectual circles of the Polish opposition long before 1989 there was an understanding regarding mutual relations in Europe under communist system. Furthermore, international and multidisciplinary session held in June 1989 in Tyniec and Krakow, dedicated to the past and mainly to the present of East Central Europe, also gained symbolic meaning. In one of the lectures Jerzy Kłoczowski (1990) said: 'Our road leads primarily through the relationship with our neighbours, with East Central Europe. When setting about cleaning in our own house, we cannot forget about this task even for a

⁸ Such ideas appeared in the writings of the group called Freedom -Justice-Independence

moment, neither we, nor all of our close and distant neighbours'. The international conference 'Belarus – Lithuania – Poland – Ukraine. Fundamentals of historical and cultural traditions of East Europe', previously mentioned herein, held in Rome from 28th April to 6th May 1990 and commonly referred to as 'Vatican meetings', was the continuation of this kind of meetings. The group of several dozen people, primarily historians, included mostly visitors from countries just regaining freedom, that is Belarusians, Lithuanians, Poles and Ukrainians (Kłoczowski 2006). It was then, during Roman-Vatican talks, when not only the most difficult issues were brought up, but also future Institutes of East Central Europe and their Federation were established⁹. This was after 1989.

However, during the Round Table sessions, the issues of Europeanism and, in general, the place of Poland in the international arena were not – for obvious reasons – brought up. The opposition, in order not to irritate the authorities, did not even try to talk about them (the internal problems of the country were indeed much more urgent); on the other hand, the authorities considered foreign policy of the country to be the area of action to the greatest extent dependent on the prerogatives of Moscow. It was enough, however, that *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and many other titles alongside, appeared on Polish media market which no longer had to go through the building at ul. Mysia, where everything that was brought to light legally was censored, that the discussion around Europe and our place in it was revived again, and not only in intellectual circles.

The vision: back to Europe

Why back to Europe? Aleksander Smolar (1988), when considering in 1988 the impact of communism on Polish society, asked: how far have we walked away from the West – in our mind, reactions, public and private attitude? To what extent has communism left its mark on us? Are we still part of Europe? As he witnessed the already decaying system and observed Polish authorities ready to modify the existing system with minor reforms and gradually give people more autonomy and freedom, but rather negative freedom, Smolar was tormented by the question: does this movement lead to Europe or does it only move us away from it? Hence, we

⁹ As a result of the conference, on 19th October 1992 (the actual cooperation begun in 1993) the International Federation of National Institutes of East-Central Europe was established on the initiative of professor Jerzy Kłoczowski, Chairman of the Board of the Institute of East Central Europe in Lublin. It is open to peer Institutes in Lublin, Minsk, Lvov, Kiev, Budapest, Vilnius, Prague, Sofia and Vienna. In 1999, the Federation was registered as a NGO with UNESCO.

may draw the following conclusion: during communism there was no Europe in Poland. Even Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1990: 3), when speaking on 30th January 1990 in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, said: 'Europe is going through an extraordinary time. Half of the continent, separated from the parent stem nearly half a century ago, wishes to be back to where it belongs. Back to Europe! This sentence has become a catchword in the countries of Central and East Europe lately. Politicians, economists, people of culture talk about it, although the latter never really left Europe; they remained in Europe of spirit, in Europe understood as a community of traditions and values'. Also Adam Michnik (1995: 166) wrote about the return to Europe in terms of Polish desire. Although he considered this idea to be more a 'landmark, declaration of intention rather than real political programme'¹⁰. East-European idea of return to Europe means just an option in favour of some features of European culture which are to be contrasted with the dogmas of communism. According to Michnik, we came back to Europe to keep the distance from ourselves, to get back the criticism, scepticism, objectivity, tolerance and the need to confront competitive views with one another.

In Poland, but also for the majority of people in the East Central Europe, the term 'Europe' has strictly positive value, but also particular significance. According to T. G. Ash, it refers to this cultural and spiritual unity and community extending at least from Santiago de Compostela to Vilnius and Lvov. Indeed, we often consider the West to be haughty, capricious, devoid of reason, perhaps even decadent; yet the two concepts, namely 'Europe' and 'the West', are complementary and in the eyes of both Poles and every other inhabitants of East Central Europe there are no contradictions between them (Ash 1987). So what would this Central Europe be? Nothing other than, to quote Milan Kundera (1984), 'the West in the East'.

Mazowiecki (1990: 3-4) said in Strasbourg that for the residents of Central and East Central Europe, Europe has always been the point of reference for questions about identity. According to him, for many years the Poles felt they were defenders of Europe and loved it; for three hundred years the ideology of the bulwark of Christendom, and therefore the bulwark of Europe, remained firmly fixed. After the turning point of 1989, nothing changed: the Poles still considered Europe to be 'the homeland of freedom and rights'. However, the resentment towards the West and grudges against it for abandoning us on the other side of the Iron Curtain,

¹⁰ Michnik's article entitled 'Myśli wschodnioeuropejskie' originally appeared in *New York Times Magazine* on 11th March 1990, and was later reprinted in Polish *Krytyka* (No. 32/33, 1990). The text also appeared in the collection edited by A. Romanowski, already cited herein (Michnik 1995).

for agreeing to such division of Europe, remained deep. This specific community of political tragedies along with geopolitical realities, collective memory, societies' awareness and political status of state organizations – often uncertain, unstable, contested by the East or the West – are typical of the countries of East Central Europe. Bronisław Geremek (1995: 173-174, 185) considered this to be the source of frustration and increased nationalism syndrome resulting from constant fear for both state existence and identity, which is very fragile. This region is neither uniform nor distinct enough on the cultural map of Europe to clearly define its identity.

Michnik (1995: 168-169) also noticed this problem; he saw both in Poland and in every other country in Central and East Europe the struggle between European spirit and – in the case of the country on the Vistula River – Poland-centrism. When Michnik was writing these words in 1990, he had very specific concerns: if we assumed that Yugoslavia was the miniature of Central Europe, and its internal conflicts could have been the miniature of future conflicts in post-totalitarian Europe, it would be easy to imagine that this Central-European mosaic may face many similar feuds over the borders. According to the chief editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, unhappy nations, living for years in humiliation, enslaved, imprisoned, full of complexes, feed on resentment, which often arouses hatred. According to Michnik, back then East Central Europe was facing two alternative ways: either the war for borders involving barbed wire entanglements placed around them, or an attempt to bring a new order based on pluralism and tolerance. The first was related to nationalism and isolationism from the world, whereas the second was the way leading back to Europe.

Hence, perhaps, comparison of Poland meaning the entire East Central Europe, to 'a man after a serious illness' (Mazowiecki 1990: 4). Countries, which regained their freedom after years of oppression, are weak and strong at the same time: their weakness is manifested in state structures, institutions, or economy, but their strength lies in experience of survival of a community based on European values. Only one thing, namely closing the gap between the East and the West, may prevent this part of Europe from 'balkanization'. Not to mention joint march of Poland and its neighbours towards Europe.

Common march towards Europe: on foreign policy

Firstly, to annul the division – Krzysztof Skubiszewski, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, began his first international speech by calling

to annul the Ribbentrop-Molotov (Mazowiecki 2010) pact dividing Europe into two spheres of influence: the German Third Reich and the Soviet Union. The first country lost the war and its sphere of influence; the second, however, won it, therefore, the border remained where it was previously set. Naturally, breaking the pact was symbolic as Europe was definitively divided into two parts at the Yalta Conference in 1945. However, it was no accident that safety assurance was the main goal of Poland's foreign policy. East Central Europe – as it was stressed out – could not become a grey area, a buffer or neutral zone, because the area of such status, due to its location, would easily become the subject of competition between stronger states. This was the reason why it was important to annul the dualistic division of Europe.

It was Skubiszewski's task to outline a new concept of international policy¹¹ and conduct it in an extremely difficult situation, in reality subject to rapid and radical changes. The first Minister of Foreign Affairs after the turn of 1989 actually took over the programme of *Kultura*¹² and enriched it with two very important elements: firstly, the idea of Europeanism and common European institutions using their attraction (although back then there were very few signals showing that someone in the West might be even considering the extension) and secondly, establishment of this policy according to international law, agreements and treaties. Snyder considers the policy of this Minister of Foreign Affairs towards the Soviet Union to be unique in the world: Skubiszewski conducted the policy in two directions, addressing both central authorities in Moscow, but also individual Soviet republics, which no other government in the world did at that time (Snyder 2007: 330-331). Skubiszewski, when speaking about foreign policy and his major tasks, mentioned both widely understood pro-European policy and establishing this orientation by including Poland in integration structures and networks of West-European interdependences. The other thing, equally important, that the Minister pointed out, was strengthening and deepening regional links within the Visegrád Group, the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Central European Initiative (Hexagonale) (Skubiszewski 1994: 6-9).

Of course, in accordance with *Kultura* guidelines, Eastern policy was supposed to be an important factor in European policy as well, because – as the Minister himself said – 'trouble in the East will have its resonance in the West' (Skubiszewski 1994). Foreign policy was to be based on the imperative of reversing the function of Poland's position between the East and the

¹¹ However, Krzysztof Skubiszewski was not the only creator of Polish foreign policy in the first years of democracy. Naturally, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronisław Geremek, mentioned herein many times, played an important role, too.

¹² It might be surprising that Jerzy Giedroyc, as one of the people who shaped Polish foreign policy of that time – albeit indirectly – was also one of its committed critics.

West (however, domination of the East prevailed in Poland's history). Hence clear tasks: supporting democratic and free-market tendencies in the East and independent statehood of eastern neighbours. Skubiszewski emphasized that we should help and support Ukraine and make other countries overcome their aversion to Ukraine: 'An important task was to create some relations between us and Ukraine that would balance the asymmetry and contrast between increasingly stronger linkage between Poland and the West and the lack of comparable bonds of Ukraine with the West' (Skubiszewski 1994: 9).

'Regional structure of the march towards united Europe' was to help Poland join the West; three (later four) countries made up this structure: Poland, Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic, Slovakia) and Hungary as these countries – as Bronisław Geremek (1990: 339) argued – shared common experiences, problems and related interests. The alliance of these three countries was also supposed to create a bridge between the North and the South of Europe, that is between Scandinavia and the Baltic, where Poland took most of actions, and the Mediterranean Sea and the Danube, which was the zone of Hungary's operation. Notwithstanding, this concept remained nothing but theory: Bronisław Geremek, with the support of Zbigniew Brzeziński, proposed a reorientation of the East-West axis in favour of the North-South axis. To finally break the stereotypes, to stop being only the bulwark of the Latin world on the one hand and Slavic cape on the other, Poland was to be the keystone of the arch connecting the North and the South (Geremek 1990). The interest of Polish government in a group referred to as Pentagonale, that is: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Italy, was very deep back then. Poland and these countries, as Minister Skubiszewski (1990: 3) emphasized in his parliamentary speeches, have various bonds and long tradition of cooperation as well as shared history (almost all of these countries were members of the Federation of Historical Societies of East Europe, already mentioned herein). This new regionalism, in particular the cooperation with Prague and Budapest, was considered to be an element assuring safety in central part of Europe: 'This is a positive action, not aimed at any new divisions. Its purpose is to connect for common good, the good of Europe, and not to divide anything against anyone. The point is not to create the cordon separating anyone. Europe is a wholeness, and certain regional unions strengthen this wholeness and do it good. It is diversity that Europe is noted for' (Skubiszewski 1991: 11).

European cooperation – as it was believed – would lead to a different world, a world eliminating antagonisms or at least reducing them, a world without violence and various annexation. And it was not a utopia, but a real chance. This was a great dream of that generation

of intellectual elite, not only Polish but – in a broader perspective – also European. In 1990, Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1990: 7) asked the members of the Council of Europe to imagine 'our Europe' Anno Domini 2000: 'It will certainly not be the Europe of goods, capital and people moving freely across borders but it might be the Europe of significantly reduced customs and border barriers, fully open to the youth. After all, the future of our continent will depend on what Europeans we will jointly bring up'.

The philosophy of foreign policy promoted by such people as Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Bronisław Geremek and finally Krzysztof Skubiszewski, was actually developed before 1989. Therefore, it was impossible to predict what would happen to the Soviet Union and its satellite states; it was also still uncertain whether the Round Table or the June elections would be held or whether the Berlin Wall would come down. Still, the project that was taking shape in the offices of Polish historians, in the Paris suburb of Maisons-Laffitte, and that was refined on solidarity polystyrene, in shipyards, in the haze of Bronisław Geremek's pipe, set very ambitious demands and high goals. Perhaps it was so because sometimes, according to Max Weber, 'one can attain the possible only by wishing the impossible'. It is a matter of method. For Poland, the state policy goals must always be high. This is a result of our history, our place in Europe, the challenges of today and of the upcoming decades' (Skubiszewski 1993).

The creation of the idea of East Central Europe played an enormous role of a 1989 turning point. Firstly, the initiative of Polish historians in favour of neighbourly cooperation between Poland and other countries of this part of Europe seeking common values in history, in similar experience and goals for the future, have laid solid foundations of purely political talks, thereby greatly facilitating them. The talks between the elites, for example Polish and Lithuanian elite at conferences in the early 90s, toned down mutual prejudices between the two nations and stereotypes created in their minds, thereby allowing the authorities of both countries to carry out peaceful and friendly negotiations regarding state borders, minorities, but also future cooperation in other areas. Secondly, Halecki's or Mierosławski's visions of independence of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, defining prerogatives of policy with an emphasis put on the fact that future, independent Poland would not raise borderland territorial claims and accept the borders agreed on in the ill-fated Yalta, reached the masses, thereby making it possible to avoid both conflicts

about the borders and ethnic riots. Thirdly, emphasizing the separateness of this part of Europe showed to the world that there are countries which, although they do not belong to Russia, are situated in the East of Europe and do not differ civilization-wise so much from the western part of the continent. These are the countries situated between the East and the West, the countries of the so-called Younger Europe.

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