

Why did the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth not belong to the West?

Reflections of contemporary authors on Central Europe
and its relations to the West

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The aim of this paper to reflect on the concept of the “(stolen) West”, frequently present in different formulations of the idea of Central Europe, and to discuss the diachronic extent of the term “West” as it appears from this context. The idea of Central Europe is an old notion, dated at least at times of a famous Neuman’s work *Mitteluropa* (1915). It was revived in the 1980s, thanks to several writers who started to underline the long-term cultural contacts with the West of some countries situated in the Eastern bloc (as Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary) and their community of values with the Western part of the continent. This concept, expressed by M. Kundera (1984), was developed by different authors, serving then – after 1989 – as a background for extension of the Western political entities to the “new countries of Europe”. The idea of Central Europe tried to convince global elites about a Western cultural legacy of Central European countries. This intention, however, failed. The only inheritance of the revival seems to be today its political effect. This political overtone provoked a harsh criticism, emphatically expressed by M. Todorova (1997).

But the idea of Central Europe was not only about social values and geopolitical reality. An interesting historical concept was presented – still on the wave of the idealistic revival – by a Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs (1985). He argued that Poland, Bohemia and Hungary followed a similar pattern of development, approaching the socio-economic and political structures of the European (Latin) West in the first five centuries of their statual existence and then, since the beginnings of the early modern era, have become part of the European East, with a different type of economy, no share in European colonization and progressive loss of significance and statuality. He simultaneously underlined that Central Europe became a victim of bipolar expansion, symbolized by both Western and Eastern absolutisms. In this view Central Europe, or

rather its legacy, is associated with freedom as a social value. Although the Szucs's vision was concentrated on Poland, Bohemia and Hungary, he did not ignore the impact of Habsburg monarchy on the region. For Szűcs, the Vienna's monarchy was a Central European state *par excellence*: not centralized, that only eventually (after 1789) became a "prison of peoples".

Yet, the Polish case differs from Bohemian and Hungarian ones as the fates of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (further: PLC) were much more connected with the Eastern Slavic part of the continent and did not enter into the sphere of Habsburg state before the end of *ancien régime*. How far, then, Poland can claim to share the "Western legacy" of other Central European cultures?

In order to answer this question it is indispensable to define what was "Eastern" and "Western" at early modern times. At a first view, this question does not make sense, since the documents from the epoch perceive rather the South-North division of Europe, including PLC to the second region. This perception is confirmed by names given to conflicts involving PLC and neighbouring states ("Northern wars"). As argued by L. Wolff (1994), the concept of East referred to some parts of Europe started to be developed only in the 18th century, with quite a big role of (Western) Illuminists. Nevertheless, the historians and thinkers of our times still use the opposition of East and West while speaking about early modern Europe.

The East/West division is especially presented in the economic history of Europe, dividing the continent in two parts along the line of Elbe and opposing the expanding and rising economy of Western Europe to its agricultural and still more backward Eastern part. The persistence of such perception may be shown by choosing a symbolic date that marks the beginning of an early modern era, being at the same time a starting point of modernity in the Western world. While many prominent historians or thinkers prefer to indicate in that role 1492

(F. Fernandez Arnesto, J. Attali), the canon of school manuals in Poland often opts for 1453. It is interesting indeed: the date of 1492 symbolizes success of European expansion and all early modern European revolutions (scientific, industrial etc.). On the other hand, 1453, marking beginning of Ottoman expansion in Europe, recalls rather a history of endangered and dissolving Christendom than of successful Europe.

However, this clear East/West opposition is not useful, even in the same area of economic history. I. Wallerstein argued that there were more than two paths of national development, exemplified by early modern England, Venice and Poland. The problem of the European South, difficult to classify in the bipolar opposition, is also reflected by the Italian historiography, concluding that Italy ceased to be a centre of important European changes since 16-17th centuries when the area of importance was moved to the countries situated on the Atlantic shores (P. Prodi). The problem of a European South also regards other issues, as social models of families (open / close, cf. Hajnal) or extension of the Baroque culture in Europe (South and East vs. North and West).

On the other hand there is a West as a set of values. The notion of a “country without stakes”, as simply defined in a work by J. Tazbir (1973), showed an image of PLC as a tolerant state that did not use violence against other’s beliefs. At the same time the Polish historians underline highly developed political freedoms of the PLC, overruling those created in England, usually treated as an exemplar model of what became modern democracy. However, these peculiarities of the Polish-Lithuanian socio-political order were contrary to the main lines of development of the Western Europe, as confessionalization or absolutist tendencies, and disappeared already in the 18th century. Did then the PLC follow a normal path of Western development? This question introduces a further problem: to what extent may the locally created

solutions be treated as (ideologically) Western? What is the role of “imported” Western concepts, especially if they seem to be contrary to the values we define as Western nowadays?