



New European directions for Prague

Europe 2000

At the end of Europe's most convulsive year since 1945, Neal Ascherson imagines the Europe of 2000

It's almost 10 years since the first sprouts of the new Europe began to appear. The first little shoot piercing the frozen ground appeared at Gdansk in August 1980. At once it became clear that this was a species unknown to science: a mutation had taken place which set nationalism, class interests, ideas about economic management and theories of liberty into a new relationship. At the same time, the climate gave uncertain signs of changing for the warmer. A new frost followed: martial law in Poland and Fred Halliday's *Second Cold War*. But in the middle of the 80s, the hints of the thaw returned and rapidly became proclamations.

When the new plants began to appear in a crop they tended to be named after cities. Budapest, and then Warsaw. Moscow, then Tallinn and Riga and Tbilisi and Vilnius. In each place the first sprout was joined by more. Budapest and Warsaw again, and suddenly Leipzig and Berlin. As I write, Prague is in revolution. There, too, it is evident that the Civic Forum is made of that new mutation of ideas about freedom

which is in Neues Forum in Germany, the Union of Free Democrats in Hungary, the Citizens' Committee movement which ran the Polish election campaign for Solidarity, and Ecoglasnost in Bulgaria.

There are three possible forecasts. The first and least plausible is that 'forum politics' are going to be the background of all European political behaviour by the year 2000, West as well as East. The second (which I would bet on) is that forum politics, with their striking combination of market economics and emphasis on social justice and 'green-ness', are the nascent form of the new European Left for the next century. Their scent seems to resemble that of social democracy in a new mixture. As the existing communist parties are so clearly doomed to vanish or to transform themselves out of recognition, perhaps Jonathan Steele was right when he wrote in these pages that 'what we are witnessing... is not the end of history but the end of the historic split which 1914 caused on the European Left.' In short, the reunion of the Second and Third Internationals under a transformed social democracy.

The third possibility? It is that forum politics are a flash in the pan, a transient style responding only to the needs and tactics of a revolutionary moment. The battle won, these broad fronts will split up into the 'natural' pluralism of socialist parties, christian-democrat parties, right-wing nationalist parties. I wrote recently that 1989 was another 1848, or 'Springtime of Nations'. And, fairly enough, people wrote to say: 'Remember what happened that year! After the glorious unity of the people under the banner of liberal revolt, didn't the bourgeoisie in the end turn against the working class and - in the June Days in Paris - send the army to drive them back to their place?'

Of all these city names, I have a guess that Lvov will tell us most about Europe in the 21st century. This is because what happens in Lvov will reveal what is to become of Russia in the coming century, and that in turn will dictate what kind of political order will be constructed on our continent. Lvov is not the capital of the Ukraine, which is Kiev, but it is the great city of the western Ukraine: with Vilnius, the joint capital of the Border-

lands which once lay between the heartland of Poland and the heartland of Russia.

Two imperialisms fought over these submerged Borderland nations: over Lithuania, Byelorussia and the western regions of the Ukraine. But the political movements in the Borderlands do not want to be under Polish or Russian protection; they want to find their own way and it may be - especially in the Lithuanian case - that this means independence. If the Soviet Union implodes, if Mikhail Gorbachev is carried down into the vortex of some terrible struggle for power, then the Borderlands may float away from the Russian state. The Poles, except for the most incorrigible nationalists, have resigned ambitions to be again the rulers of Lvov (Lwow) or Vilnius (Wilno). But then the new states of the Borderlands would have to be built into some European security system which meant that they could never again be a threat to Russia - or an ally to Russia's enemies.

Here again, the possibilities for Europe in the years after 2000 are forked. 'Float away'? It is equally likely that a violent power struggle in Russia - the 'civil war' which so much frightens Moscow intellectuals - would also be a struggle to retain or regain power over the Borderlands. That, in turn, would put any new European system to an agonising first test: would it be possible to stand by and watch the crushing of Baltic, Byelorussian and Ukrainian democracy movements in only passive sympathy, even if there was certainty that such a Russian reassertion of imperial power would never try to win back control of Poland or the other states beyond the Soviet frontier?

How should the inner structure of Europe in the 21st century look? I think that the structure will be determined by events close ahead of us now, especially around Germany. It is becoming more generally agreed that the 'Helsinki process', the series of meetings and conferences on European security and co-operation which began in 1975, cannot provide a strong framework for collective security. It can lay down guidelines for external and internal behaviour among the 35 signatory nations, and provide negotiation to reduce force levels and military confrontation. But it relates to a Europe which never happened, in which the two superpowers would retain their zones of hegemony but symmetrically reduce tension and oppression between and within these zones. Instead, one superpower has abdicated. The old 'Soviet half of Europe contains the remains of many old conflicts, and those remains may well be as toxic when they thaw out as when they entered the Stalinist deep freeze over 40 years ago.

A more positive pan-European structure is needed to replace the two military pacts. Talk of extending the European Community to the Soviet frontier is fascinating but gaseous at present.

What does lie ahead, I predict, is a major conference on Germany. It would be a four-power meeting (USA, USSR, Britain and France), to debate calling the peace conference which should have formally wound up the second world war. This meeting would invite the two Germanys to work out together the nature of their future relationship, including reunification if they so wished it. Next, this relationship would be ratified at the peace conference, and it's at that stage that the 35 Helsinki nations could join in, embedding the German settlement in a network of guarantee treaties preventing - not just condemning - the settlement of disputes by force.

Would this structure work, any more than the post-Versailles League of Nations did? I think that there are reasons for careful optimism. Forum politics, to start with. Here is an international movement sharing a cluster of liberal and humane values, among which is the belief that in conditions of liberty the traditional sources of tension between nation-states dry up. The first voices to proclaim that German reunification no longer threatened anyone came from Adam Michnik and Bronislaw Geremek in Poland and from Imre Pozsgay in Hungary. It is in Hungary that the Forum approach to foreign politics will be most tested, though. When President Ceausescu is overthrown in Romania, as he certainly will be, can we expect that sovereignty over the Hungarian-settled tracts of Transylvania will cease to matter? If Yugoslavia were to break up, would Hungarian politicians take only a neighbourly interest in regions like Vojvodina which were once ruled by Hungary?

A second reason for sensing that a new collective security system will work is the attitude of forum politics to national sovereignty. Nationalism is a huge force behind all these upheavals in Europe. But, at the same time, Stalinism has discredited the idea of the sovereign, autarchic nation-state.

Mrs Thatcher thinks that Poland, Hungary or Bulgaria will be her supporters when it comes to the struggle against supranational integration. But I believe she is quite wrong. Even Poland, for all its patriotic intensity, would have no problems about pooling sovereignty in the manner of the European Community after 1992 - given two conditions: that the Poles have faith in the EC's commitment to political democracy, and that the Community shows proper understanding for and patience with Poland's economic afflictions. A good guess for the next century is that the principles of Jacques Delors will have no stronger advocates than the governments of Eastern and Central Europe.

Here one comes back to the German question. If the 'liberated states' of Europe are going to bother less about frontiers and sovereignty, then the significance of a German confederation, or

state, of 80m is reduced. In the West German SPD, they say that reunification should only follow 'the establishment of a new European peace order'. This would be achieved by the sequence of four-power meeting - peace conference - European collective security treaty described above. It is only Mrs Thatcher's 'Europe des patries' which will be unbalanced by an expansion of the Federal Republic to a *Grossdeutschland*. A Delors EC of semi-integrated, sub-sovereign nationalities from Poland to Ireland would find it much easier to assimilate.

The grandees of this Europe in the year 2000 will not be in Brussels but in boardrooms. They will be giant corporations based within and without the continent. 'The united German economy' won't dominate as such: the standard of living in West Germany may actually slow or stall over the period in which investment and financial encouragement is directed to reconstructing the East German economy. But also AEG, Siemens, Hanomag, the Dresdner Bank and all the publishing interests of Bertelsmann will be among the individual colonisers of reunified Europe.

The question remains open. Will Eastern Europe be de-industrialised by competition from the West and pushed back to the semi-colonial status of territories providing food, raw materials and cheap labour to the Golden Triangle - the ancient German vision of *Mittleuropa* Czechoslovakia should escape this: Bohemia, at least, has an engineering tradition and a consumer industry with a good chance to adapt themselves to the market. But the future of heavy industry in Poland, Hungary and the Balkans is bleak. Asset-stripping by Western buyers can be foreseen, but will there be investment?

Lastly, I believe that this Europe of the next century will change out of all recognition as a population group. We are living in a new America which is reluctant to admit the fact; in a continent which the poor of the outside world are beginning to choose as a destination. Twenty years ago, small peasants in Asia inhabited a world they didn't expect to leave. Today, the distant possibility of raising credit for a charter ticket, of signing up with some agent promising visas and fraudulent work permits, is changing everything. The history of immigration into Europe over the past quarter-century may seem like the history of increasing restrictions and smaller quotas. Seen in fast-forward, though, it is the opposite: the beginning of a historic migration from the South into Europe which has gained its first decisive bridgehead. In the long run, nothing can prevent this movement. Laws and bans can delay it only a little. This is a necessity which will have its way, and the Europe of 2089 - though it may well be strong, brilliant, peaceful - will not much resemble the little white 'Christian' Europe of the previous century. ©

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