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# HOW IS A MIDDLE EUROPEAN POSSIBLE AND WHAT IS HIS BENEFIT TODAY?

There was a time when everyone knew what a Middle European was. And even if they did not know precisely, at least they conjectured. One way or another, they believed they were able to recognise one at first glance, even if they had never heard the term before, even if their conjectures were wrong. It is true that not at every time, and most definitely not everyone knew with absolute certainty what Middle Europe was. And yet a Middle European.... There was something in the very atmosphere, in the very construct of Europe of old, which heralded the presence of a Middle European, which rendered his existence necessary and irreplaceable. He just had to be, therefore he indubitably was, and even the notion of Middle Europe was not a necessary condition for his existence. So self-sufficient was he, and so versed in the art of self-limitation, that at times he may indeed have seemed limited. And yet he was not limited really – not in the least – but most of the time he chose self-imposed constraints. He had to. These self-imposed boundaries were so obvious, so evident, that he became self-evident of old. In short, it was always evident that he had always existed.

What instituted the self-evidence of this, if not nearly extinct, then at least seriously endangered human species? The long-lasting, ever-replicated lines of European history. The never-ending variations upon a few easily recognizable themes, embellished with an abundance of peripeteia for diversion, yet always against a certain, constant background. The wholeness and unity of Europe was defined by tensions and competing ambitions, while the state of peace or war depended on the balance thereof. In order to maintain the balance, hostages, witnesses, and potential victims were required. As well as culprits, found *ex post*. Missions and objectives were indispensable. Space – soon to turn into distance – was needed, except that space was not so much a common ground as the ground of common grievances. This continued for some three hundred years. This is how Middle Europe came into being. It came into being, because everyone needed it to be. Finally, much later, it turned out that it needed itself, for its own good. Restrictions hardly ever came to a Middle European from within, not right away; in most cases they were not a freely chosen, categorical imperative.

What were the characteristics of this human species, whose involuntary destiny was to ensure the unity of Europe and often to pay heavily for its loss? One the most defining features was his command of many languages, fluent and accent-free, with the exception of English. The all-but-absence of English was one of the essential attributes of the species, whereas Middle Europeans today (if there are any left at all) coming from various linguistic spheres communicate among themselves in English more often than not. And this is a surprising, even shocking turn, a novelty. The classical Middle European considered German the *lingua franca* in his part of Europe. Therefore he always tried to communicate in German first. At that time, globalisation did not yet exist, but without a shadow of a doubt Middle Europe already did.

The Middle European was not always aware of the fact – to be honest, mostly he had no idea – that he was a Middle European, but this unawareness even more emphatically made him one. Contemporary Europeans inhabiting Central European countries are convinced that they are Middle Europeans, though in most cases they are not.

What constituted this enigmatic human type? Intuitively, its representatives suspected that most probably they did not belong to the West – meaning both Western Europe and the West in general, the West as a construct. Their lives were too indeterminate to lend themselves to any definition, too uncertain for them to take control or at least to gain self-assurance, too changeable for them to be persuaded by any theology. Their theology consisted in a lack of faith, or in doubting any and every religion. Life and history did not provide them with a sufficient sense of continuity, but rather brought them upheavals and schisms in excess. Their capacity for adaptation was astonishing, but not inexhaustible. And that is precisely what distinguished a Middle European from an Eastern European most clearly.

A Middle European was not frightened enough to become a megalomaniac. From a historical perspective, however he desired fame he was unlikely to be vain – personally, he might have been; historically, he was rarely so. He was hardworking, but rarely zealous. A Middle European knew with absolute certainty that he was not the

one to mark out the borders of his assigned territories, and that he must make do with the borders outlined by others – and that included state borders. He knew he needed to manage within them, and that within these boundaries he was forced to cultivate his creativity. This external constraint was compensated for by means of an infinite space within, his interior landscape.

Grand political strategies, therefore, were the work of others – in the West, and in the East. This is what distinguished the Middle Europeans, and this made them alike in their own perception. Whenever Middle Europeans wanted to achieve something momentous (admittedly, not a rare occurrence), then they either withdrew inside, within themselves, or they emigrated. Either of these two paths was good enough. The third path – to stay where you were – statistically, was the one most abundantly proven. In the case of emigration, the West was the more popular choice compared to the East, provided that the emigration was voluntary. This historical experience became so deeply engraved in the memory of Middle Europeans that if there ever was a chance of an even semi-voluntary emigration, it inevitably took them in the westerly direction.

The real strength of the Middle European lay in the fact that from his involuntarily chosen, defined central point, he understood both the West and the East; what is more, he understood them much better than they were able – or dared – to understand themselves. Otherwise, the West and the East understood one another perfectly in their historical pretensions: in this they were alike and like-minded – after all, they wanted the same thing, only they were trying to achieve it from the opposite ends of Europe. And although from the strategic perspective their ambitions were mutually exclusive, from the philosophical perspective, the understanding was complete, since the ambitions were equally great. This understanding offered the sense of being equal. As a general rule, respect does not always have to be the opposite of hatred. The West and the East simultaneously respected and disrespected each other in equal measure. The only thing they were not able to do was to disregard or to ignore one another. Therefore they never lost sight of each other, always keeping tabs. Instead, they disregarded Middle Europe, while eyeing each other over its head.

Middle Europe, however, could not afford to disregard either the East or the West. Indeed, it was destined to always keep its eyes on them, as it never knew what they would come up with next. One thing was for sure: they would come up with something. Their mutual pretensions were usually solved in Middle Europe, no less. By the same token, Middle Europe became the measure of historical success for the West and the East – regrettably, for the West and the East at the same time. As a result, Middle Europe was left with too little time to mind its own affairs, because it had to mind both the West and the East simultaneously.

Whatever misunderstandings between the East and the West in strategic matters, ambitious endeavours, megalomaniac plans and far-reaching intentions, their mutual understanding in everyday, household affairs, was equally slim. For the West, the East European way of life was laughable and contemptible, while the East admired and glorified the Western lifestyle. The East also envied it. When it came to the so-called “soul”, the situation was exactly the reverse. There was a mutual bewilderment: negative from West to East, positive from East to West. Or was it the other way round? They were exotic to each other, in their manners. And yet this exoticness of manner was very powerful and universal. There was perfect agreement as to who wanted *what*, but a lack of agreement as to *how* they wanted it.

In such situations as this, intermediation is often indispensable. And for a long time, the Middle European was such a direct intermediary. Although he did not manage to develop consistently or sufficiently his own identity, due to the lack of attention – both others’ and his own – to himself, the premises and conditions of his life imprinted upon him this identity of intermediary with even greater force. At the same time these constant, continuous observations of East and West, this increasingly, incredibly subtle, sensitive alertness, this – as it were – “historical empathy,” enabled the Middle European to know and understand the East and the West intimately: for his own sake and theirs. To understand, in minute detail, that which had to be constantly watched.

Thus we arrive at the first explanation of the term “Middle European.” The Middle European was a European of the middle not

only because he remained in the middle, but also because he found himself in the middle, in-between. He was a middleman-European in the great dialogue – and often the great conflict – between the West and the East. To mediate, to intercede – that was the true gift and true calling of the Middle European.

He was the intermediary for everything: languages, intentions, accents, passions, souls and their various hues, ideas, nay – even humour. So intense this intermediation was that the Middle European assimilated the qualities of both the East and the West. He knew all the languages, including the intermediate ones. Including the trans-border, in-between languages. Although he did not usually speak English, he was equally amused by Western and Eastern jokes – because both these regions appear ridiculous to the Middle European. Therefore he laughs twice, in a manner of speaking. That gives him an enormous advantage, and that is his wealth. He has developed his own, separate amalgam of humour, which not only allows him to laugh at the jokes of both the East and the West, but also at the East and West themselves, mostly at both at the same time. Often this was his only weapon whenever pressures from either or both sides became unbearable. To understand the humour is the key to understanding the essence. The Middle European had an advantage: he understood. He had a double understanding. He often understood, in the West and the East, what they did not understand, either about their own selves, or about each other. That is rarely pardoned, since the fact of others understanding something which you do not yourself understand always inspires suspicion and never sympathy. That is why the Middle European was unpopular, not much liked. He was dangerous not because of his strength, but because of his capacity for understanding.

Now the Middle European was not a man without qualities. He was a man of double, twofold qualities, of manifold qualities, and that made him amazingly flexible in his capacities and talents. Because these capacities were usually too numerous to constitute one coherent character, he may have appeared to be a man without qualities. In addition – and above all – he was something other, something third, and quite unusual. Time and again the horizons of expectations, memories, hope and fear lent atmosphere to his intuition and climate to his creativity. The probability of extraor-

dinary ideas occurring here was always much higher than outside the middle, while the probability of their incorporation was never equal to these countries' potentials. Ideas are born out of obscurity, but they are incorporated in determination.

The Middle European knew from his own experience that each thing, each affair, each event has at least three dimensions – therefore it should not be explained and named and handled squarely. He knew the inconsistency, contradiction and imperfection of the world inside out, not sparing the world of ideas. More than once – frankly speaking, more often than not – he allowed himself to be swayed and seduced by apparently strong, convincing ideas. The greatest weakness and the gravest sin of the Middle European lay and still lies in his longing for unambiguity, a trap he repeatedly fell into, which is perfectly understandable in this reservoir of complications, this reserve of complexes. Just the same, it is tantamount to self-betrayal, because enlightenment ideals carried through with the utmost constancy culminate in leftist dictatorships, and practical romanticism brought to excess in rightist ones. In either case, the middle falls apart, and the extremes emerge triumphant. The middle disappears beneath the edges, beyond the borders. It perishes beneath the extremes. It disintegrates.

This is not to say that Middle Europe was merely the victim of extremisms and totalitarianisms. Far from being a laboratory used to evil ends, where the East and the West carried out their experiments, oh no, it was not as innocent as that. Quite the contrary: it certainly took part in those experiments zealously and of its own free will. The zeal, perhaps, resulted from the uncertainty, the complexity and the ambiguity of its own inner world. From the ambiguity which was so agonizing, so unbearable. Conceivably, this is why it was so eager to get rid of it, to shake it off, to flee into certainty.

However before Middle Europe was thrown, or threw itself, into the realm of barbarity, by breaking up into East and West (and therefore ceasing to exist), it lived in a trial, a pursuit of a middle way. That middle way was defined by scepticism towards each and every all-encompassing, all-explaining ideology. It was inspired by distrust towards tantalisingly daring declarations. It was carried by a lasting hunch that antinomies, contradictions and inconsi-

stencies are not only an inseparable part of life, but also its proper expression. Not a deficit, but a manifestation. Life as such reveals itself only in contradictions. It does not suffice to recognize and tolerate these contradictions but – as far as possible – they must also be enjoyed, in the pure sense of the fullness of life.

Obviously, I am talking about a Middle Europe which never existed in stated form, the idealised Middle Europe, which – in addition to the above – I also attribute with mediating postmodernism and post-heroism (Švejk being an excellent example of a Middle European). As usual, here also they took their liberties with the great ideologies of the West and practices of the East. Even more so than in the West. Indeed, here also they were desperately seeking and chasing after clear and unambiguous identities, for themselves and for others, in order to define and consolidate them once and for all. Of course, in this case they also overindulged in questions as to “who,” instead of asking “how” to live together and create a shared future. And yet: if Middle Europe makes any sense at all, it is this, ideal Middle Europe.

Notwithstanding all that, today it matters very little which departed Middle Europe we mourn and recollect: whether the Imperial and Royal-coloured utopia returned to the past, equating Middle Europe with the Danubian Monarchy, or rather the other, German one, which views Middle Europe as the space between large-format spheres of influence, the German, and the Russian. It matters little, not because there is no difference in the origin, but because there is no difference in the outcome. And the outcome is as follows: today, Middle Europe is no more.

The private Middle European visions of great Europeans – Jerzy Giedroyc and Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal, György Konrád and Danilo Kiš, Claudio Magris and Karl Schlögel – also played out differently than their authors intended, joining the exceedingly portentous, extraordinarily beautiful repository of well-worn illusions. Unrealised, because unrealisable, unachieved, because unachievable.

So variably sensed, so variously systematised, Middle Europe was last seen alive in 1989. Middle Europe was important for as long as

it had no access to Europe “proper”. The latter has been continually, increasingly equated with the European Union. Metonymy gradually morphs into synonymy. It turns out that the said Middle Europe is not its own form, it is not a form in itself and for itself – it is merely a temporary quarantine, an enactment of a passage to Europe “proper”, the Europe believed to be the true, the better one. Thus the notion of Middle Europe in the sense of the Europe of intermediation became devalued to the meaning of Europe as a separator, a mean, a middle. Middle Europe as a separator for and by virtue of Europe. A European means, not an end.

The transition happened against the backdrop of semantic mutation within the concepts of “Middle Europe” and “Middle European”. Until that point, the “middle” in those expressions did not denote the inferior “not clear where this belongs”, but meant highly creative connections, productive and significant for the sense and self-awareness of the said “middle”: “neither – nor” – in other words, a self-conscious assertion and distinction from “just the West” or “just the East”; and “both – and” – namely, staying open in the face of these two horizons. Today, the “middle” has acquired the embarrassing resonance of an inferiority complex. Of the intermediary, the mediator, nothing remains save meanness and mediocrity. Step by step, this mediocrity, this averageness took over the stage of semantics and the interior landscapes of self-perception. The movement to escape these meanings was frantic. Suddenly, no one wanted to be Middle European any more. A Middle European meant a mean, “average,” a pitiful, deplorable European.

In fact, several faithful devotees remained, but they have no power, and, as we say in these parts – “they do not make a spring”. To former Middle Europeans, the European Union certainly means what Middle Europe meant until not so long ago: the certainty and constant affirmation that you belong to the proper, inner circle, to Europe proper, to Europe itself. The fact that yesterday’s Middle Europeans enjoy this circumstance of belonging most intensely is perfectly understandable. For too long their European identity had been too uncertain, too much threatened, too heavily compromised. The Union, on the other hand, is the only true guarantee of belonging to Europe as such. It is the guardian of the Grail, the highest authority on things European.

Then again, today we might have particularly good reasons to reanimate the notion of Middle Europe. It would be good for the West, good for the East, and good for Europe as a whole. For Europe in general. For Europe as such – not only for the Middle.

A new Middle European identity would be important for these countries which do not (yet) belong to the European Community but gravitate and aspire towards it. Middle Europe would find its significance no longer in the outdated sense of a purgatory on the way to the EU paradise, but as a conviction and certainty of the middle – a conviction which not only derives from the historical and cultural belonging within Europe (the greatest weakness of non-EU European countries west of Russia at present), but also vigilantly and tenderly stands at the very centre of European events. It takes an interest and engages in European affairs energetically and passionately; it shows and shares the European existential curiosity; spiritually, it remains within, inside, in the middle. The Middle European also embraces the spiritual centre. He becomes European in the sense of the immediate idea of Europe.

“The other state” of such a Middle European individual, newly thought through, a brand-new edition thereof, would define itself beyond the capacity to bear Europe’s and the world’s complexity, assuming it to be a tiring, transitory state of emergency, at the most. He would add to it his capacity to notice, amidst all that complexity, the necessary premises for a valuable European life, worthy of every effort. At times, even to enjoy that complexity. The Modernists believed in condensed truths. They believed in truths that could not only be discovered, but also implemented in reality. Many of them were ready to fight wars for these truths, and many did. They produced heroes and martyrs. Perhaps a contemporary Middle European would be concerned not so much with truth and war, but with good neighbourly relations and collaborations. A new Švejk would be more beneficial to us today than a new Roland. In the conviction that the “middle” – including Europe’s middle – is not located somewhere definite, but may be found in any place where they believe in Europe. Where they live in “the other state”.

This is the only way for Europe to stay, to survive, and to exist in its entirety. Only when it is composed of the middle, and nothing

else. Of one compacted and diverse middle. This is how we may live, in European integration, as an alternative to unification.

Not only to endure various ideologies, but also different versions of the past – which means also different designs for the future. And not only to endure – this is not the hardest part – but to live trusting that this state is perfectly normal, perfectly inevitable and – perhaps – unpleasant, rather like our own ephemerality and finiteness. On the whole, the lack of a one and only, coherent model of life, the presence of otherness – the coexistence of it – should be dealt with in the same manner in which we deal with the fact and idea of our own mortality. By learning to cope with it, and by not letting these circumstances spoil our life, while it lasts.

The Middle European today might return, this time again as a necessity, out of necessity. As an inner and internalised necessity of a new species. The Middle Europeans – if they appear again – will appear in order not to lose themselves. But mostly, in order not to lose their and our own Europe.

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