

The interpretation of the Central and Eastern European conflict based on the theory of István Bibó

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In his works, István Bibó paid special attention to the anti-democratic nature of the region. Bibó said that the nations of Europe were created in the 5th–6th century and then the borders of the European nations were drawn during the Middle Ages. He estimated the formation of the modern state to the 15th–17th century in Western Europe and said that patriotism was not actually born with the French Revolution. The French Revolution brought “only” the modern patriotism.¹ The regional status of Central and Eastern Europe and language-related nationalism also appeared in these times. Modern democratic nationalism appeared in the region as a result of the French Revolution and it created a new situation. Bibó saw the differences between the borders of countries and languages as the main reason of the problems. This situation caused innumerable border conflicts which do not seem to settle even in the 21st century.

The origins of the conflict

Bibó says that the efforts to achieve independence by the nations of Central and Eastern Europe are the reasons why the concept of *people* did not mean the group opposing the aristocracy but the whole nation being a language-based national group willing to break away from the oppressive power. This has become a specifically Central and Eastern European phenomenon.

The nations living here “declared the programme of unification of all the language-mates... declared the programme of monolingual national state. The essence of both efforts was the same: to support the uncertainty of political existence by ethnic factors... Such line of historical experiences is what forms a nation.”² He sees the problem of Historic Hungary in the fact that the efforts for independence were opposed by the European reaction and Hungary’s own dissatisfied national minorities at the same time. The situation resulted in the disaster of 1849. This historical situation brought up the Austro-Hungarian Settlement in 1867 and Hungary was caught by the historical events of 1918 and then 1944 in this condition. Meanwhile Hungary did not detach from the feeling that Europe owed Hungary because of a severe injustice.³ Other nations in Central and Eastern Europe struggled with similar problems as well.

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Bibó sees that Hungary is the one among the Central and Eastern European states that gave in the moral bill always at the wrong time. Firstly after 1849, then between 1918 and 1938 and finally as an ally of fascist Germany. Searching for the reasons he points out that the region was characterised by backwardness. The question may well be asked: What was the earliest historical event that initiated the separation of Eastern and Western Europe? Bibó states that there has always been something anti-democratic and violent in the region.⁴ István Széchenyi had already shared a similar opinion about the differences between Eastern and Western Europe: here “power comes into the room, sits down at our table and you have to say thank you when he eats up your dinner, while in England you can invite the power if you want, and it will sit down at your table respectfully and praise you for the good meal.”⁵ “This situation may not be explained by anything else but the stopping of the development caused by historical shocks.”⁶ We can also state, he says, that the most confused political philosophies have spread out in this region. Bibó thinks that partial truth affects the people if they can satisfy certain emotions by them. He adds however that we must not assume about any nation that they are *originally* unable to develop because they all carry the demand for freedom.

The root of their unbalanced nature therefore lies in the uncertainty of the national framework. “The national framework in Eastern Europe was something that had to be made, had to be restored, had to be fought for, and had to be worried about all the time.”⁷

We can agree with his other statement that the balance of *democratism and nationalism* is required for the harmonic development of a nation, and if this balance is moved it might cause severe damages. He thinks that it was very harmful for the history of European democracy that the spread of democratic ideas was related to a foreign invasion (Napoleon’s conquest) in Germany, Italy and Spain. That is why democracy and national feelings emerged as two principles that can be opposed against each other.⁸

The Central and Eastern European nations got into “collective hysterias” as a result of numerous historical disasters; everything was subordinated to practicality for example Olympic records. All these events lost their spontaneity, self-centeredness, and they served the self-documentation of the nations – states Bibó aptly. The state of mind of being afraid of existence outplaced clear reason, which may explain culture becoming over-politicised. The attitude, and world concept of the Hungarian society is strongly over-politicised rather like in other countries of the region. The greatness of the Western nations however lies in the fact that they live their national lives with perfect equanimity and they do not want to achieve something as a nation all the time. But “in the special circumstances of Central and Eastern Europe the linguistic togetherness has become a political and historical factor...”⁹

Bibó's contemporary, Gyula Szekfű,¹⁰ states that Hungarians and non-Hungarians should live together in a federate system. He thinks that national conflicts were deepened in history and it all lead to the suppression of the Hungarian nation. Szekfű originates the multilingual Hungarian state from the time of the Ottoman occupation of Hungary and he thinks that linguistic assimilation is not a condition of living together as our monarchs in the Middle Ages did not make efforts to achieve this. The final aim of Szekfű's concept is to show that the historical borders of Hungary are needed to be restored.¹¹

In my view, the concept of one language, one peoples, one nation can not be held for a long time. It is also certain that territorial debates are very dangerous and Bibó thinks if this becomes dominant in the life of a nation then it might stop the development of a community that is not democratic yet. We can agree with Ortega's statement that in the newer ages of Europe the nations were not monolingual because peoples speaking the same language got together, but rather because the framework of an existing state was made monolingual by the hegemonic majority of one or an other nation.¹²

Bibó's most important message regarding the Hungarian nation is that national and sociological problems are to be approached with the demand of universal validity.¹³

The theory of Milan Hodža

In the following international comparative outlook I briefly summarise how acknowledged foreign and Hungarian legal experts and politicians think of the opportunities of stabilising the region. The starting point of Milan Hodža's¹⁴ concept is that any organising principle we may have there will always be minority enclaves and these may only be protected by establishing federation. His concept differs from that of Bibó in many aspects however we can discover very similar thoughts as well. Similarly to Bibó he thinks that the national feeling must be harmonised with democratic values. They both saw the basis of nationalism in mass emotions. Hodža split the nationalisms of the region into two categories and thought that the nationalistic efforts of the peoples of the Monarchy being oppressed nations are democratic nationalisms while the Austrian nationalism is not democratic as the Hungarian nationalism diverged from this way as well when the national rhetoric became of oppressive nature. In contrast we know Bibó's opposition that differentiates between the nationalism of the healthy Western democracies and the nationalisms of the region.

Starting from the situation of Czechoslovakia Hodža's aim was to harmonise decentralisation and nationalism while he did not exclusively accept the viewpoints of either the Czech or the Slovak nationalists. Hodža aimed for the preservation of Czechoslovakia by providing the rights of the national minorities and dividing the state

into territorial units. He considered the cooperation of the states in the region as necessary and possible as there are very similar states in the area. Hodža thought to discover the common point of the states of the region in agricultural democracy that is in the economic organisation. Hodža however did not consider the nationalistic emotions of the class of smallholders as aggressive. He names the basis of permanent peace the community over the nations that is not exclusively politically based but rather economically and politically instead of the framework of national states.

The main difference between their concepts is that Bibó always maintained reservations against a construction of territorial basis and imagined borders on an “ethno-linguistic”¹⁵ basis. Hodža’s idea based on the regionalism of minorities was far from his concept and he did not see the former Yugoslavia as an experiment of minorities but rather as a national state. Radical nationalism naturally was far from both of them.

He considered the federal solution as important not only because of the reasons mentioned above but also because confederation may be the only basis of permanent consolidation between the Russian and the German territories. Hodža thought that such a structure would have to be established against the Russians while Bibó judged the Russian political situation differently and – although many thought this point unfounded – he expected the Soviet Union to create some sort of a federation.

The theory of John Lukacs

John Lukacs points out that the multinational states were always only temporarily united structures; for example in Czechoslovakia the Slovak nationalism was established as early as the 1930’s. Slovakia rather supported Hitler and served the Germans. Bibó wrote about this, that none of the nations were fascist or socialist for itself; they all became one or the other in order to achieve an aim. The Slovak nationalism was then reborn in 1989 and the state of Czechoslovakia was finally split into two, but fortunately not as a result of a bloody change like in the former Yugoslavia. Lukacs draws attention to the dangers of radical nationalism and thinks it is a group full with animosity that keeps up against the majority even if they are in minority.¹⁶ All this has nothing to do with the old-fashioned patriots’ deeply rooted love of their country says Lukacs because the patriot becomes frightened of the bluster and hatred towards foreigners of the nationalist. In addition the nationalists suspect everyone even their own fellow countrymen that are anybody, who thinks differently. In his view the nationalism of the twentieth century has contradicted liberalism while there were liberal nationalists in the 19th century. The word ‘liberal’ has a negative meaning

in many respects today; similarly to 'communist' it refers to anti-patriotism and to overemphasized liberality in Central and Eastern Europe. Bibó pointed out as well that the symbols of nationalism are the strongest among all schools of thought which may explain the power of nationalism today. However the crises and changes of the political system were initiated by nationalist movements: this destroyed the Habsburg Empire and terminated the soviet oppression as well. Lukacs draws special attention on the rebirth of nationalism today. He says that the language in itself can not keep ethnic groups together, as the Czech and the Slovak languages used to be very similar just like the Croatian and the Serbian. His interesting point is that by nationalism getting stronger the concept of Christian also appears like a synonym of the word – which should normally be abhorrent with radical nationalism – because that refers to non-Jewish, non-liberal and non-socialist today.¹⁷ Lukacs summarises his analysis saying that today nationalism has the greatest power again.

The theory of György Konrád

A number of legal-theoretical concepts have tried to understand the present historical events in the region. György Konrád for example analysing the region states regarding the war in Yugoslavia that the disorganisation of the nations and ethnic groups has been the origin of severe conflicts as a result of which the West first stepped to a way that aims to change the borders and the NATO has first provided military aid for that in the form of war since it was established.¹⁸

György Konrád leads the uncertainty of the Central and Eastern European nations back to the decisions in Yalta which he considers as basically unjust. Bibó exactly suggests that the issue of democracy and the issue of freedom are basically the same issues because the framework of political power and the framework of the nation meet. The problem arises from the fact that exactly this is missing from Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁹ This way the overemphasised national issue has come in front of the democratic content. György Konrád also states that the former socialist countries were not socialist by themselves as this was a result of a decision forced on them. Their durability may be explained by the fact that these are less developed countries where the soviet economic-sociologic model proved to be viable for a longer period of time. György Konrád considers the sovereignty and the principle of territorial integrity of national states as the major principle of international politics. This is the only way to make democracy which is nothing else then autonomy, solidarity, an effort to solve our conflict, the greatest achievement of European development. Finally this is the reason and target of history.²⁰ The autonomy and solidarity of people in Central and Eastern

Europe is a specially difficult question. He considers the present relations of power in the region as the stabilisation of the occupation after the war. A natural consequence of all this is the rebirth of Central and Eastern European nationalisms. The Central and Eastern European region must be stabilised – stated Bibó as well – because the disorganised relations have already led to two World Wars states Konrád. Permanent peace cannot be achieved through conventions that contain technical-quantifying agreements, he adds, a different type of organisation is necessary for that.

The theory of Huntington

Huntington also dealt with the conflict in Yugoslavia and he analysed the attitudes of the great powers to the ethnic conflict of the region in a detailed way. He says that America does not have special interests in the region which may explain why Bosnia was disappointed in the United States finally. Huntington uses the expression ‘fault-line wars’ regarding the war in Yugoslavia and draws light in his analysis to the fact that it is characterised by temporality, while the so called fault-line conflicts²¹ behind them are eternal. These wars share the following characteristics: They break out between geographically neighbouring ethnic groups, where differences can be seen in terms of religion, society or culture. In the cases of these kind of conflicts the treaties are concluded from the top to the bottom, while the core of the conflict originates from the bottom. This can be observed well at the end of the war in Yugoslavia as we run into the interest of great powers at each significant step. Let us observe the above in more details first and we have to say Huntington was right saying that the conflict arrived to its final stage in 1994 when the NATO warned the Serbians to take armed forces out of Bosnia. Russia however objected that they wanted to settle the Bosnian issue without them. Finally the Serbian’s behaviour led to the Soviet not objecting the NATO air offence. Similar international pressure was applied on Croatia as well for example from Germany. In August 1994 Milošević approved that the Serbians would be chased out of Krajina and pushed back. Eastern-Slovenia gradually got under Croatian control. As a result of the Milošević’s policy the UN terminated the sanctions against Serbia.²² Related to this Huntington adds that he thinks that the price of fault-line wars is betraying the relatives.

He considers the treaties concluding these wars as permanent only if they take into consideration the relationships of the secondary and tertiary interested parties as well. He adds that the responsibility of preventing such wars to break out must be taken by the great civilisations of the world.

Possible recommended solutions for the debated borders in Central and Eastern Europe

It is a fact that Europe must be finally stabilised,²³ states Bibó. He says that in World War II, the viewpoints of the nations were related to the debates on borders because none of them were fascist or democratic just by itself but rather for the possibility of gaining territories. Our final question therefore is: How could Central and Eastern Europe be consolidated?

Bibó thinks that the first opportunity of consolidation was opened in 1918 when the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire exploded. The right of self-determination of nations would have been applicable to secure order in Central and Eastern Europe but the principle was not carried out consistently. Maybe because, he says, we have heard enough about the right of self-determination of nations from Hitler. The borders today have been established as a result of international agreement with the approval of the great powers; the borders drawn after World War II exist practically. The problem therefore lies behind the injustice of the borders drawn.

Bibó arrives to the conclusion that a good border either represents linguistic borders or meets some historically established status quo.²⁴ Borders must be clearly defined because only those borders may remain permanently stable that brings emotional satisfaction for the nations involved. In order to achieve this aim even an economically and geographically irrational border is acceptable.²⁵ Bibó thinks that the statement that justifiable borders cannot be drawn in this region because of the highly mixed populations is a conscious confusing of the issue. He thinks that the view that there are no eternally valid borders because life is of constant change is harmful as well. Permanent peace may only be achieved by the stabilisation of the region; *the good border should not be changed*. He does not agree with changing peoples and resettlement of the population because these were frightful means of making order. This way he arrives to the final conclusion of good peace, which is a result of a treaty made without tempers and the good border is one that rests on historical legitimacy that is on Talleyrand's principle. Mutual resettlement of the population should only be made only if there is no other solution and once done it should not be reversed.

To be able to conclude a treaty without tempers he suggests the respect of principles and human rights because without principles any claim may be possible. He considers the human rights as the major values of Europe because these are the most permanent, most humane achievements of the Western culture the roots of which are originated from the Greco-Roman Age. The issue of nation and border does not seem to be settled today however the region must be stabilised.

Summary

Our question is how to consolidate Central and Eastern Europe? The opportunity to do so was first open in 1918 when the Ottoman Empire and the Empire of the Habsburgs exploded. The human right to self-government would have been applicable to settle things in Central and Eastern Europe but this principle was not consistently followed. Today's borders have been established by international agreements, with the approval of the Great Powers; the borders created after World War II are still preserved. The problem therefore lies in the injustice of the borders drawn. The question of borders does not seem to settle however the region must be stabilised because both World Wars started here and if this is issue remains unsolved we might face a new conflict as well.

Notes and references

1. I. BIBÓ: *Selected Studies Vol.: 2.* (1945–1949) [Válogatott tanulmányok II. kötet (1945–49)] (Budapest, Magvető) p. 190.
2. I. BIBÓ: 1986, Vol. 2, p. 196.
3. Like the Trianon and Paris Treaties.
4. Power politics makes war inevitable and coexistence impossible, says Bibó.
5. M. SAMU: *State Theory* (Államelmélet) (1992, Püski kiadó, Budapest) p. 111.
6. I. BIBÓ: 1986, Vol. 2, p. 214.
7. I. BIBÓ: 1986, Vol. 2, p. 216.
8. I. Z. DÉNES: *The Humanisation of Power* (A hatalom humanizálása) Offprint of the Hungarian Journal of Philosophy 1980. Vol.: 6 (Budapest, 1980) (Anti-fascist and Anti-conservative Analysis of History and Concept of Society in the scientific work of István Bibó before 1945) (Antifasiszta és konzervativizmus-ellenes történelem-elemzés és társadalomszemlélet Bibó István 1945 előtti tudományos munkásságában) p. 924.
9. I. BIBÓ: *The Misery of Eastern European Small States* (A Keleteurópai kisállamok nyomorúsága) 1st Edition (Új Magyarország, Budapest, 1946) p. 19.
10. I. Z. DÉNES: *Distorted Hungarian Complexion – István Bibó's Debate with László Németh and Gyula Szekfű* (Eltorzult magyar alkat – Bibó István vitája Németh Lászlóval és Szekfű Gyulával) (Osiris kiadó, Budapest, 1999) pp. 32–33.
11. Later he adjusted to the changed situation, his concept changed and he suggests readers to adjust to the circumstances of socialism in his paper: After the Revolution.
12. S. SZILÁGYI: *István Bibó* (Bibó István) (Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2001) p. 118.
13. I. Z. DÉNES: *Nation and Memory: The Validity of Self-Determination* (Nemzet és emlékezet: Az önrendelkezés érvényessége) (Magvető Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1988) p. 319.
14. Hodža is a Slovakian politician and thinker. The former prime minister of Czechoslovakia supported the transformation of the Monarchy. Regarding his theory there is a detailed analysis in I. Z. DÉNES (Ed.): *The Small Circles of Freedom Studies on the István Bibó's life-work* (A szabadság kis körei-Tanulmányok Bibó István életművéről) (Osiris, Budapest, 1999) pp. 116–121.
15. I. Z. DÉNES (Ed.): *The Small Circles of Freedom* (A szabadság kis körei) (Osiris, Budapest, 1999) p. 119.
16. J. LUKACS: *The End of the 20th Century and the New Age* (A XX. Század és az újkor vége) (Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2000) p. 220.
17. J. LUKACS: 2000, p. 243.
18. GY. KONRÁD: *The War in Yugoslavia* (and what may follow it), Notes from March till June 1999 (Palatinus, 1999) p. 651.

19. I. Z. DÉNES: *Nation and Memory* (Nemzet és emlékezet) (Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 1988) p. 326.
20. GY. KONRÁD: *The Temptation of Autonomy* (Az autonómia kísértése) (Codex Rt. 1989) p. 321.
21. See in more details in S. P. HUNTINGTON: *Clash of Civilisations and the Formation of World Order* (A civilizációk összecsapása és a világrend átalakulása) (Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1998) on fault-line conflicts, pp. 501–502.
22. Detailed description of the war in Yugoslavia in HUNTINGTON, 2000, pp. 501–515 and GY. KONRÁD: *The War in Yugoslavia (and what may follow it), Notes from March till June 1999*, p. 651 (Palatinus, 1999).
23. The existence of the European Union theoretically puts new light on the question, so I complete my concept with the statement that in spite of the existence of the Union we have to consider the problem because the rebirth of European nationalism is a process going parallel with globalisation and the future of the Union is uncertain even at the time of writing this article; the faith and drive in it seems to be stopping.
24. See in more details in M. SAMU: 1992, p. 87.
25. Bibó didn't say what are the criteria of economically and geographically irrational borders.

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