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Transformation Trends in Central and Eastern Europe

Bulgaria. Social and Cultural Landscapes, edited by Christian Giordano, Dobrinka Kostova, Evelyne Lohmann-Minka II, University Press Fribourg Switzerland, Fribourg 2000; p. 253; *Baltic States. Looking at Small Societies on Europe's Margin*, edited by Christian Giordano, Alina Zvinklène, Daniel Henseler, University Press Fribourg Switzerland, Fribourg 2003, p. 184; *Poland beyond Communism. Transition in Critical Perspective*, edited by Michał Buchowski, Edouard Conte, Carole Nagengast, University Press Fribourg Switzerland, Fribourg 2001, p. 353.

In wide interdisciplinary discourse we have been learning how the transformation from a socialist to a free market economy has affected all the participants of this process. The most frequently discussed participants are the most obvious yet not the only ones. However, they have strong interrelations with their own history and with the rest of the world which is also participating in the transformation. The discussed situations in a few countries of the Eastern and Central European (ECE) region in the books *Baltic States. Looking at Small Societies on Europe's Margin*, *Poland beyond Communism. Transition in Critical Perspective* and *Bulgaria. Social and Cultural Landscapes* are examples of the discourse on the effects of these interrelations. Few features make them different from other literature on this subject. They present the results of research on these challenging issues in ECE countries conducted in their national research centres with the cooperation of scientists from abroad. The authors raised a discussion from a wide international and interdisciplinary perspective regarding courses of change and its implications during the transformation years. Thus they attempted to show that the changes in ECE are important in the

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context of world history. This importance is discussed on various levels, clearly pointing out relations with contemporary societies, as well as ties resulting from deeply rooted historical and cultural determinants. Especially those discussed on the national level explain many of the "hidden" reasons regarding the countries' reaction to the systemic change. On the one hand, the communist period in the cultural perspective in the ECE region has been treated as a black space while, on the other hand, it is clearly analysed as part of history and part of identity which strengthen these societies' cultures. Discussion at regional level shows the specificity of reaction to transformation in this part of Europe. It also leads to recognizing the similarities and differences among the ECE countries themselves and between the ECE region and the European neighbourhood. The authors from the countries directly involved in the analysed process represent political, economic, ethnographic, anthropological and sociological approaches. Each of the aspects is very complex in nature even for "people from inside the transformation." It has also been difficult to understand the subtleties of this part of history for the new generation and hence, it is even more complex for those who have not experienced living in Eastern and Central Europe. These books address all these groups. The presented research results and analyses pave the way for creating an understanding of this historical process accompanying the transformation. The origin and historical experience of the contributors, as well as the composition of the subjects and approaches in the books are of multidimensional benefit. As is clearly pointed out in these books the ECE countries' history and culture and many processes they have experienced are sometimes based on similar principles. However, this does not lead to overlooking differences resulting from each country's cultural and historical specificity. The books are about two issues, one of which is about the states' identities and reshaping turbulences and the other is about the transformation process and its effects on the social, economic and political life of the area. Together they portray two sides of one picture.

The way discourse is conducted itself reflects an important step in the process of transformation. The authors rightly stress the point that these books are also a kind of result of a process of renewing the dialogue between Western and Central Eastern Europe, working on building common models for understanding the changes. They aspired to contribute to rebuilding the long constrained dialogue between science represented by Western and Eastern scientists, who noticed that communication between European scholars "could only be improved by explicating rather than denying differences in academic traditions, theoretical as well as empirical approaches."

Reading these books leads to the observation that despite the differences which are deeply discussed versus similarities regarding the transformation process itself and the specificity of the region the third context is identity

building in ECE in the frame of Europe. Many arguments presented here lead to the conclusion that ECE countries consider themselves as states on Europe's margin (*Baltic States. Looking at Small Societies on Europe's Margin*). The ECE countries also realise various influences affecting their social and cultural "landscapes" (*Bulgaria. Social and Cultural Landscapes*) and mechanisms enabling them to "last" and "grow," despite all the pressures enabling them to keep their identities which are based on historical and cultural roots (*Poland beyond Communism. Transition in Critical Perspective*). These three books can be considered as a series of pictures regarding the dimensions of change in this part of Europe. Each of them deserves special attention as each of the discussed areas has its specific historical portrait. Making a comparison between them after reading these books shows how deep the differences are. A second level of analyses, namely comparing this region to the western part of Europe allows the reader to have a better view of the similarities between ECE countries.

The introductory summary of the three books with such differentiated approaches and dimensions of analyses, has the main purpose of showing the way of presenting issues connected to transformation processes in the East European Region, by selecting certain issues which are sometimes essential and sometimes most provocative. Due to the number of contributors to these analyses, it has been decided to omit mentioning the authors' names and titles of all the interesting articles, and instead some points of discussion, issues or subject areas analysed there are emphasised. Some views are common to most of the contributors but others can seem uncommon and provoke the reader to further detailed exploration. This provides additional value to the books.

Whatever aspect of the transformation we discuss – the political system, type of economy, social mechanism of adaptation, identity building (or rebuilding processes) it will only cover a certain part of the whole process. Being aware of this the authors focussed on social reactions to the changes, through historical analyses, to build some kind of model of regional strategy based on a system of strength versus elasticity, to accommodate national, regional and global contemporary challenges. *Baltic States. Looking at Small Societies and European Margin*, presenting the point of view of ECE research and a team from Switzerland in a discussion on distinct and common features in the countries' political and socio-economic structure stresses the role of their cultural background and political history. A brief insight into the past demonstrates the substantial impact of the different historical regions of Europe which they had shared. The differences are rooted in the modernisation history of Baltic national societies and the respective shaping of different social frames. There is a clear correspondence between the Baltic nations' building and creation of national states. The Baltic people perceive themselves "rather as Europeans " because of

their involvement in European history and also as Europeans for whom the "true" Europe is a reference society. Nowadays, as has been pointed out, intellectuals are considered as the main inventors of the nation and consequently of nationalism. Speaking about *remote regions* the authors underline the duality observed in the Baltic States, on the one hand, the question of building their own identity in the context of EU membership is raised and on the other hand, they claim their "glorious European past" (referring especially to Lithuania). The discussed historical differences refer to the type of parliamentarianism which was different in Lithuania from Latvia and Estonia which were rather "peasant nations" with a shared "peasant citizenship" and numerous intelligentsia. Discussing national histories in terms of democracy building the authors evaluate changes through modernisation (different stages of modernisation in the Baltic states). The articles look at current demographic similarities, family structure similarities, economic data similarities, religious and linguistic differences, living standards, salary levels, consumption etc. This leads to the observation that there are many similarities between Latvia and Estonia but less with Lithuania. The analyses show that despite the experience of the soviet totalitarian regime which separated the Baltic States from European development for fifty years this region maintained its strong identity. In fact, the Baltic region is not as homogenous as it has usually been considered (Protestant versus Catholic religion). But they are homogenous in the sense of stressing historical continuity with the states existing between the two world wars. The idea of equal social citizenship is one of the most sensitive and widely discussed issues in these books. The present situation of the citizenship problem is shown with its specificity – as not comparable to the concept of naturalisation under normal circumstances.¹ Many people affected by citizenship regulations have been resident in the territory of the states for a long period or were born there. Stressing the concepts of social citizenship, transformation, transition, integration by using data from statistical and sociological investigations the authors indicate the difference between legal regulations and practice. The next relevant point investigated here is the role of public opinion in the context of political-economic decisions concerning the negotiation process with Brussels. The strength and influence of broadly understood culture is portrayed in the interesting example of Riga, which is considered as a true and symbolic place of origin of many intellectually acclaimed personalities and trends in the region. Riga exemplifies an old European multicultural city with a rich heritage. Another issue discussed in the context of culture and history is the case of

¹ This issue refers broadly to the view which Czesław Miłosz developed in "Zniewolony umysł," Wydawnictwo Literackie Kraków 2004, "Lithuania will exist but Lithuanians will no longer be there," p. 247. (First edition 1953).

Lithuania analysed as an independent state which can be traced back to long before the 19th century with its nationalistic feelings often accompanied by historically based anti-Polish tones. The authors undertake the issue of stereotypes in the case of the tragic Jewish history in the Baltic region. They also analyse the peculiarity of the labour market in the Baltic States during the last years and reasons for increasing women's employment (especially in higher education). Among the main reasons they indicate drastic cutbacks in financial support in the sciences and humanities and decreased interest in academic careers among men. On the other hand, the precarious general economic situation in Lithuania along with the instability of family relations, compels women to seek professional careers and secure steady incomes and retirement pensions. Job problems reflect the fact that 204,000 people are working abroad and there is still very high unemployment in the countries.

Social and Cultural Landscapes refers to Bulgaria's history through various stages of its development and various regions in the context of the European neighbourhood. Democratisation, globalisation, universality, market development as the basic concepts used in this discussion are intended to lead to an explanation of the consequences of political changes, at first for the area and the country with its population. The book reflects on the question of different responses to change among various social groups. It mentions national, religious, ethnic and social issues. It surveys the past to evaluate its impact on the present legacy of socio-economic structures and collective mentalities built and elaborated in specific historical circumstances. The concept of "present historicity" as used here leads to building a comprehensive view of changes in social, economic, political and cultural aspects with respect to the historical determinants. The challenging question is Bulgaria's socio-economic backwardness with its reasons and perspectives. The concept is used to explain the distance between Bulgaria and western countries. Through the notion of "uncertain present" in Bulgaria the authors refer to the post-socialist dilemma, involving the complex political change: democracy, factionalism and potential ethnicity in the public sphere. They refer to several significant factors, such as backward economic structure inherited from pre-socialist times and socialism, geographical disadvantage, military conflict and the instability of the Balkan area (and its effect on investments), discontinuity of the priorities of the changes.

Among the main reasons for backwardness the authors point out historically rooted geopolitical instability (14th century onwards – Ottoman conquest), which turned the entire Balkan area into a periphery on the border between two warring empires. An interesting remark refers to the Ottoman feudal system's strong influence on Bulgaria's agrarian structure. Remarks about "timar" and "ciflik" show their role in today's Bulgarian rural culture

and identity. This shows their present ties with the process of growing landowners and latifundists (who owned most of the restructured lands still maintaining the traditional rural model). "Europeanisation" is considered synonymous with "modernisation" by the authors and does not only mean a change in life style, but primarily the dismantlement of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire's old socio-economic order. The outcome in the towns was the abolition of the corporations' monopolistic regulations while in the countryside – a class of small peasants who by now had become the actual individual owners of their own land. "European" change in culture was applied in a wide sense and all these social and cultural transformations brought about by the reforms could be interpreted as the attainment of the necessary requirements for the development of a capitalist and industrialised society and economy.

The authors refer to the "traumatic experience of socialism" and the concept that "soviet socialism" is merely an "imported article" to Bulgaria. They explain the complexity (and impossibility) to "establish a unified socialist society" planned through ideological conformity and administrative and economic centralisation as well as by socio-cultural homogenisation (strong regional and ethnic differentiation survived). It is underlined that "unified society" did not succeed in terms of rural urban duality. The authors analyse unemployment as an important effect of the changes. They bring to attention facts saying that in the early 90s the labour force decreased in towns twice as much as in the villages. The change in employment structure was expressed with the increase of the private (in relation to the state sector) sector in trade, industry and agriculture. Quoted statistics show continuous growth in the share of private initiative in all sectors. In agriculture it kept increasing continuously. Although the increase in share of those employed in the private sector was slow, in 1997 it reached 55.3%. The notion of societal transformation implies the change of society's systemic characteristics, which should involve development strategies such as: computerisation, market development and universality. Lack of development of the industrial sector unable to absorb the rural manpower surplus also causes unemployment peaks in the overpopulated countryside. An issue in the current situation of the agricultural sector which is broadly discussed is the class of small owners emerging in the overpopulated agricultural sector. The Bulgarian countryside underwent a ruinous land fragmentation due to the new inheritance laws introduced by the adoption of law imported from Western Europe (subdivision into equal shares). The authors stress severe repercussions on peasant lives causing property atomisation, low productivity and economic stagnation. Nowadays, Bulgaria's situation in agriculture can be explained through its specific historical determinants. Hence, the authors refer to rural populism – as an important idea of socialism based on the ties of the rural community. An interesting point is raised by

a remark of the political programmes of Aleksander Stamboliiski, a person symbolising the moral and social superiority of the village compared to the town, considering "the town and the village as centres of two different worlds." This duality led, as has been rightly underlined, to "agrarianism" as a "third way" which played an important role between independence and socialism in Bulgaria. Regarding the influence of political change on people, the authors focus on everyday practices of adaptation strategies, continuation of "tradition" and even enforcement of traditional behaviour and attitudes. Explaining contemporary problems in Bulgarian agricultural transformation the authors stress the role of patriarchal, capitalist, socialist and post-socialist formations which need to be considered to understand the current Bulgarian agrarian society. From the evolutionary perspective it followed the "development model" moving with accelerated modalities from a patriarchal to a specific version of urban industrialised society. Agrarian reform has accelerated the return of private property to Bulgarian villages. According to the authors the idea of the "reversibility of history" has not fully worked nor has a peasant society been created in the shape experienced in the past. Reprivatisation without peasants, has created a new category of "new owners" living mostly in the towns and owning the land for lease, and secondly has encouraged some leaders and members of the technical and managerial staff of the old collectives to invest individually in private agriculture, leasing small plots from the "new" small owners. This has led to the emergence of a group of aggressive small capitalists increasingly monopolizing the land, who in the future can become "quasi-latifundist" owners. The picture resulting from this book covers the perspective of the country's past and shows how these changes accompanying the transformation may manifest themselves in the current rebuilding of Bulgarian society, its presence and perspectives.

In the book *Poland beyond Communism, Transition in Critical Perspective* the authors draw attention to national stereotypes, tradition and national identity. The dominant ethnographic approach is shared with the historical-sociological voice of some of the contributors. The articles refer to the country's breakaway from the Soviet empire by examining themes from a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective. As essential issues they discuss industrialisation, urbanisation, the weakening of the working class accompanied by the decline of the agricultural sector, establishment of civil rights and democratisation. They show how deeply the imposition of socialism influenced social development, culture and collective memory. The book covers the essential characteristics of "real socialism's" influence on all these spheres of social and economic life, Poland's willingness and readiness for transformation, as well as the resistance against it. It covers many contemporary issues in chapters including Belief and Nation, Resistance and Compromises, Patterns of Inequality and Globalism.

As is underlined by the authors the issues discussed here are based on data and information which were unavailable and politically impossible to gather under the regime. This has additional significance for presenting them in this collection. The implicit view shared by the authors is that connection in the world today is not only historical, but also of a global economic and socio-cultural character. The authors refer to those connections broadly indicating the role of globalisation in various spheres. Both the positive and negative effect of tensions between global and local are discussed. Hence the concept of globalisation, giving broad frames to some of the analyses presented here is perceived not only in its glorified light but the reader will also find numerous notions regarding negative effects of these processes. Some analyses refer to the effects in small cities and small industries. Another important issue discussed in this book is the rise of the middle class among private entrepreneurs. The book shows how the restructuring, privatisation and globalisation of Poland's economy has opened the country towards the international context. We find broad notions showing the special place of Poland's religion in the country's response to political and economic challenges. The role of social and cultural stereotypes has been discussed by some authors in the case of Jews, Ukraine (among other examples) to show their strength and presence in social, political and cultural discourse. An important issue, the "end of the peasantry" is shown rather as a theoretical concept underlining the surviving strategies of "never ended peasantry" despite the efforts of the state (attempts to eliminate the peasant class by attracting young generations of the "difficult class" through industrialisation). As the authors recall, the only major group not obliged to relinquish its means of production to the state was that of the small farmers. We can agree with the authors that that is one among numerous reasons to give the "peasantry" (with the hidden broad meaning – as rural class) and current effects of the changes in this class, a special place. To show the scale and dimension of the phenomenon, the authors refer to times when millions of peasants were moved from the countryside and transformed into workers often perceiving their new position as a notable social advancement. The authors discussing this issue focus more on perceiving the process as a result of a centrally planned policy rather than choices brought by economic development (industrialisation). We can say that the book delivers a picture of the main aspects of survival under socialist oppression. The pillars of culture survival, underlined by some authors as deserving special attention, were cultural stereotypes, religion and the strength of social structure features (peasantry). It has been pointed out that the general change in attitudes towards a more materialistic, more pragmatic approach and thinking is reflected in the economic and social sphere in both rural and urban areas. We can agree with the authors' view proving that the peasantry is no longer a simple category to be defined. From a farmer or farmer-

worker class it has turned into a multiple identity class. Moreover, the authors rightly suggest, that it is time we spoke about *transnational identities* in this social category. This term used in the context of rural life and rural development brings much into contemporary discussion on this issue and deserves special attention. This is a clear expression of a new approach towards this social category (people living in the countryside or dealing with agriculture), and to some extent it refers to current attempts to create a common European model of this social group. Some notions to this issue are also made from the historical and ethnographic perspective. Its author refers to aspects resulting from class structure and political influences which had made folklore some kind of unwanted, non-Soviet phenomenon and discipline. The notion stressing folklore's role and essence explains the mechanisms of its survival. Some attention is also given to the important issue of social exclusion. One of the perspectives of its analyses here is rural-urban duality. The big cities' "poor" with all factors determining their evolution are opposed to "poor" rural inhabitants, with their history and reasoning. The case studies quoted by the authors exemplify the new middle class building process with all its specifics. The authors also refer to the importance of rural sociology which could legitimate strong pre-war traditions, within the context of socialist social science.

Summarizing the above one can say that in these books the terms backwardness, margin, periphery, imitation, aspirations to West European culture, regarding Eastern and Central European countries are used to show the distance and differences between the Eastern and Western parts of Europe. The concept of backwardness is one of the possibilities of interpreting these differences in social advancement and this approach can be accepted as long as it is free of evaluative aspirations, which can be said is respected in most of the articles.

A strong point in the discussed analyses is that the authors largely refer to certain spheres of socio-economic life in these countries with a special place for the sphere of rural life and the role of the countryside in the transformation. This is one of the important aspects not only due to adaptation processes but especially due to the role ECE rural areas can play in an enlarged Europe, because these areas are some of the strong trump cards of the ECE region, unique goods, recognized as most valuable, something Western Europe is aspiring and referring to.

Political, economic, social and cultural changes in these countries are portrayed as well as changes in the process of forming intellectual frames of intercultural type regarding these processes. The books show that the current socio-economic political and cultural developments in these societies are strongly determined by the past (both so-called traditional culture and the communist patrimony). All the issues discussed in the books are located historically and in contemporary life.

The authors' view clearly advocates the statement that – there is nothing announcing “the end of history” à la Fukuyama. On the contrary, there are numerous arguments that Poland's and its neighbours' history has virtually begun anew within the new context of global capitalism.²

Having such multidimensional analyses on the one hand and the linearity model (backwardness-modernity) on the other, the concept of backwardness despite the first impression of inconsistency rather brings the possibility of interpretations of the ECE position in a wider context. Analyses of historical grounds of the countries show that they follow their own way, to some extent imitating or learning from the world but they remain strong in their own peculiarities. The historical imprint is highly reflected in the values, interests and identities whatever modifications were to be voluntarily imposed. Hence the statement that ECE cultures are imitative (mimetic) societies trying to catch up with the world leaders and that the region is experiencing imitative modernisation, can only be accepted to a certain extent.

The region will no doubt continue to change and will surely fight to improve its position within the global system. Concluding, it is worth pointing out that on the basis of this rich variety of analyses presented in the discussed books we find the multidimensional characteristic of the regional specificity: common experience of the imposition of the soviet regime, own specificity with strong identities expressed in the fact that stereotypes have survived, much of peasant culture (myth of importance of land in peoples' lives) and characteristic of specificity of the transformation process (as a response to it), although imposed it did not destroy the culture, changes in ownership, religion, ethnic differentiation, western reference society but without resignation from their own identity.

Considering all the arguments the authors are right in saying as a conclusion – that this is not the end of history but its renewal, this is not the end of peasantry but its strengthening by the development and promotion of the multifunctionality model. EU membership is providing a chance for ECE countries to make use of all the treasures that Western Europe has been missing from its past such as a healthy environment, strong identity ties, ties with traditional culture and the past, seeing itself in a wide historical context and among other societies.

² Remark by Marek Ziółkowski in *Changes of Interest and Values of Polish Society*, p. 162 in: *Poland beyond Communism, Transition in Critical Perspective*.