

LAST WORD

Can Canada be a Role Model for a Changing Europe?

Rejection of communism has dominated headlines as few other issues have over the past year. The accelerating trend doubtless will continue for some time but the focus of the issue is shifting quickly from one of often doctrinaire anti-communism to a more reasoned search for viable replacements for the old regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, it is far from being evident that capitalism, especially the kind with which we are most familiar in the West, will be an axiomatic substitute for Marxist socialism.

On the other hand, if it is possible to be certain of anything these days, it is that we are in for intense, protracted and often painful manifestations of nationalism.

There is an excellent chance that there will not be much talk of communism as the world turns the corner into the 21st century, but it is a fairly safe bet that the kind of plain gutsy nationalism we are witness to today will remain firmly fixed on the global political agenda, at least in the eastern parts of Europe.

So many countries have been shaped artificially, if not downright forcefully, according to political, ideological or strategic convenience without the consent, even implicit, of the local populations. In Eastern Europe especially, empires of all sorts — communism being only the most recent example — have managed to keep a lid on national and/or ethnic consciousness over the centuries. Now that some popular freedom is being recovered, the forces of history have been unleashed. The effects of the French Revolution finally may be taking place in the East as well as in the West of Europe.

Forces of Change are Inexorable

Within the Soviet Union, national sovereignty or self-determination of peoples is being claimed in many republics. It is happening most visibly despite Moscow's efforts to contain it economically and militarily, in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldavia. Furthermore, most probably, it also will happen soon in other parts of the Soviet empire such as the Ukraine and Byelorussia. Everywhere we turn, we are hearing about autonomy and separation, and even the Russians are likely to put forward their own brand of conservative nationalism.

In the rest of Eastern Europe, the motto for the time being is "no border revision", especially when reunification of Germany is contemplated 45 years after its postwar partitioning. But how long can that motto resist the old yet still tremendously vigorous forces of nationalism?

Is it realistic to expect that the Hungarian population of Transylvania will resign itself to continued Romanian rule — as liberal as it may appear at first blush?

How can Yugoslavia manage to hold together in the race of the multitudinous nationalist forces at work in Kosovo, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia?

Will the Czechs and the Slovaks always be united?

The border between Poland and East Germany is the most sensitive one in the region and is not likely to be raised for some time. And how long is it reasonable to expect the German populations of Silesia and Pomerania to remain quiescent?

Even in Western Europe, it is by no means certain that the strong economic integration of 1992, when all internal tariff barriers are scheduled to come down, will take care of nationalistic or regional alliances. The old nation-states will be weakened, of course, but other identities — rooted in ethnic, regional, linguistic or cultural solidarity — are equally certain to become more salient. Welsh, Scots, Basques, Britons, Occitans, Bavarians, Flemish and Walloons are just a few of the "distinct" and increasingly militant societies within the greater European community.

Federalism the Only Real Option

Unfortunately, there may be no immediate remedy for all of these problems, no panacea for all of the nationalist claims which themselves are often conflicting. If there is a solution, however, it clearly does not lie in granting sovereignty to all national entities. That is just not practicable and the problem is inextricably complicated by the phenomenon of ethnic minorities almost everywhere. On the other hand, the solution cannot be repression or forced union. Nationalism is not simply ruled out by decree or magic formula.

What then? There is only one solution that appears to offer even a minimum of feasibility and viability: federalism. But it should not be the brand that has been applied in the United States, West Germany or Canada. This so-called "co-operative" federalism has not allowed internal nationalism to be satisfied. Nor, in the final analysis, could it. Rather, it has been predicated on the existence of one national centre which, at the same time, has tended to encourage decentralization only from an administrative point of view.

What is called for in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, then, is something akin to confederation or "sovereignty-association", as was the case in the old Austro-Hungarian union.

In that respect, Canada recently was cited as a model of a union that permits a province such as Quebec to have its own "national" government and to be recognized as a "distinct society." However, as we can witness from the evident fate of the Meech Lake Accord, a lot of Canadians have not given up on the idea of one, indivisible nation-state. They are missing a great opportunity to keep Canada as it is, a country with distinct allegiances, a "community of communities", a Confederation. This country of ours, if given the chance, could serve as an interesting model for the world of tomorrow.

————— Louis Balthazar is a Professor of Political Science at Université Laval —————