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Spatial impacts of societal transformation in East Central Europe¹

Michal Illner

The deep structural changes that had been occurring in East Central European politics, economies, societies and cultures after 1989 – which are usually denoted by the code words »transformation« or »transition«² – have had far-reaching consequences as far as spatial organization of these societies is concerned. Transformation-induced spatial changes have been occurring on all structural levels and they were having both integrative as well as disintegrative effects. Thus far, analysis of these issues have been paid relatively little attention by sociologists in the countries involved and it has been rather geographers, economists and the regional scientists who approached them in a more systematic way (Cf. Andrlé 1995; Dostál 1992; Gorzelak/Jalowiecki 1994; Hampl 1993, 1996; Sýkora 1994, 1996; to mention only a few). As for the sociologically tilted authors who wrote about the different spatial aspects of transformation, Falt'an 1995, Gajdoš/Pašiak 1997, Houžvicka 1997, Illner 1993, 1997, Illner/Andrlé 1994, Krivý/1997, Krivý/Feglová/Balko 1996, Kostecký 1993, Musil 1993, Musil/Kotačka/Ryšavý 1997, Szczepanski 1997 should at least be mentioned. Neither of the two lists pretends to be exhaustive.

In this contribution we shall discuss some of these spatial issues. The regions we shall refer to are the »Visegrad« group countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia; however, a major part of our observations is based on Czech development. It may be that in the German context yet another discussion on the transformational issues appears already superfluous; it is sometimes maintained that, as far as East Germany is concerned, the main societal changes have already been accomplished, stabilization was attained and the transformational issues are therefore no more relevant. While we refrain from arguing about justification of this *fait accompli* stance as far as *die neuen Bundesländer* are concerned, the »end-of-the-tunnel« situation is certainly not

the case of the four countries we have in mind in this paper. In the »Visegrad« countries the transformation is far from being completed and in the social sciences transformational processes still constitute a main point of interest.

The discussion will proceed in three steps: after a methodological note, some general features of spatial development in post-Communist East Central Europe will be mentioned, to be followed by illustrations taken from the present and recent Czech context.

1. Methodological note

1.1

Spatial organization of society is a highly inertial system. It can change only slowly and, therefore, it acts as a moderator of societal change and contributes to the persistence of long-term trends. In the process of societal transformation existing spatial structures mostly function as a barrier to what and with which pace can happen in the economy, politics and society as a whole. This is vividly illustrated by the development of the labor market in East Central Europe: labor force cannot be easily redistributed over the country according to the demands of the restructuring economy because workers are spatially bound by the existing dislocation of housing. In a situation of persisting housing shortage, stagnating housing construction and, consequently non-existent or only embryonic housing market, it is extremely difficult for potential migrants to find housing in places where new job opportunities emerge. People tend to stay where they or rather their fathers and grandfathers were lucky enough to build houses or get apartments. The mutually inconsistent spatial structures of housing and job opportunities are matched by extensive daily migration – a way certainly inefficient in terms of time use and personal comfort of the commuting laborers. Residential migration that would bring workers nearer to the job opportunities is stagnating. In this case, just as in many similar cases, the existing spatial organization of infrastructure acts as an external brake that delays the processes of transformation or modifies their course.

Yet, at the same time, new developmental potentials can as well be hidden in the existing spatial organization of post-Communist societies which can be activated in the course of transformation. Using Czech development as an example, we can mention the case of the the country – a peripheral mountainous belt adjacent to Austria and Germany where from its sparse population, predominantly ethnic Germans, was deported in 1945-1946 and which was

never properly re-settled. During the Cold War period it was a depopulated and underdeveloped region, full of military ranges, strongly supervised security zones and whose large parts were inaccessible to civilian persons. Unexpectedly, after 1989, this backwardness turned into an asset. A consequence of the marginalization and of the economic as well as demographic regress was that nature remained mostly intact in this region which emerged from the forty years of isolation as an ecological »paradise«. Together with the neighboring Bavarian national park it constitutes one of the largest pieces of unharmed nature in Central Europe with an immense potential for recreation and development of the respective services.

Thus spatial organization of society can both delay as well as stimulate societal transformation and it is, of course, itself molded by the change.

1.2

When approaching spatial changes in the transforming post-Communist societies, distinction is to be made (on the analytical level at least) between those spatial phenomena which are the consequence of societal transformation, phenomena that are the heritage of the »real socialism«, and those processes which are manifestations of long-term or global spatial tendencies, not specifically related to the Communist past or to the post-Communist situation. To the last mentioned belong those spatial processes that are commonplace in modern societies and had been blocked or delayed in East Central European countries by the Communist system; only recently they have been released by the transformation. In this context suburbanization, metropolization, gentrification of city cores, privatization of spaces etc. have to be named. A mere temporal coincidence of such spatial changes with the political, economic and social transformation in East Central Europe cannot be interpreted in a straightforward causal way.

In this paper we try to concentrate on the transformation-induced spatial changes. Yet it must be stressed that in the real-life situations the three above-mentioned kinds of spatial phenomena overlap and are closely intertwined, so that to distinguish between them may be near impossible.

1.3

Much of the recent research has generalized on the transformations in Eastern and Central Europe as one whole, including eg. the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belorussia, the Baltic states, the Balkan states as well as the countries

of the Visegrad group. The generalizing approach has been based on the implicit assumptions that 1. these countries share certain geopolitically determined historical and cultural characteristics that make them all »Eastern European« or »Eastern and Central European«, 2. there are structural and cultural similarities among all these countries given by their common Communist past (the »legacies«) which are very important in the analysis and prediction of their post-Communist development, 3. that all these countries aim at the same target, i.e. political democracy and a market economy, 4. that on their way toward that target they will follow more or less the same path.

Such assumptions are justified only to some degree – and so are the generalizations which are based on them. The generalizing approach may have been more legitimate before 1989, when the otherwise widely different societies of Eastern and Central Europe were amalgamated by the external pressure of the Soviet dominance and forced into the Procrustean bed of the uniform institutional structure (yet even then, there were many divergences), but has become less and less adequate after 1989. During the last years all the long-term differences among the Eastern and Central European countries and their clusters that were forcefully overshadowed by the uniform institutions of the Communist system began to re-assert themselves. The »*historical episode*« during which societies with considerably different historical backgrounds, systems of social organization and belonging to different socio-cultural orbits were assembled under one roof is over, and these societies are again embedded within their traditional contexts. Thus it is legitimate to generalize on the transformation and the concomitant spatial processes in clusters of kindred Eastern and Central European countries – the Visegrad four is one of them, but much less so on the post-Communist Europe as a whole. In fact, the concept »post-Communist countries« is increasingly misleading as tool of analysis and prediction.

After these two methodological *caveats* we shall move on to discussing the spatial changes themselves.

2. Characteristics of spatial development in post-Communist countries

Which, then, are the characteristic changes in spatial organization of East Central European societies that have accompanied the post-Communist

transformation? Let us mention some outstanding features of this development. The following points have been inspired partly by research, partly by impressionistic observation and all of them are in need of further verification.

1. After 1989, *spatial development in East Central Europe took a more-or-less spontaneous course*. This was the result of deregulation, decentralization and implementation of market principles in the uses of space. Economic interests have been getting the upper hand in spatial development, pushing aside other interests, notably environmental protection, preservation of cultural heritage and maintenance or rather attainment of territorial balances. This applies both to the urban as well as regional development. The instruments formerly used to control spatial development – such as regional, spatial, physical or urban planning – have been weakened, delegitimated or altogether abandoned. The Darwinist concept of »ecological processes« coined by the Chicago School of sociology became a relevant model capable to explain many aspects of recent spatial change.

2. *Marketisation of space* has been taking place. Real estate markets have developed, value of spaces is again established according to the standard criteria – position, quality of infrastructure, environment etc. Assets whose prices were until recently symbolic and poorly differentiated are now getting genuine price tags. However, there still is a long way to go before a normal and functioning housing market is established. Because of its utmost social and political sensitivity, the process of deregulation of housing is rather gradual and controlled rents have been maintained. However, behind the scene a shadow housing market has been operating and a dangerous gap has been opened between housing needs, prices of housing and incomes of the population.

3. *Privatization of space* is a concomitant of Marketisation. State owned as well as communal land and buildings were or are being transferred into private hands. This occurs either by »restitution«, i.e. by transfer of property to former owners or to their descendants, by the »standard« methods of privatization or by the voucher privatization. Privatization in terms of ownership is accompanied by privatization in terms of access. Space is partitioned into private or semi-private niches, the distinction between spaces public and private, non-existent or blurred under the Communist regime, has sharpened. Public access to many spaces has been restricted or altogether prohibited, fencing, private guards, aggressivity towards trespassers has become widespread. Spatial segregation, mostly in housing and leisure activities, is spreading, though still not commonplace. Upper-class residential zones mushroom in suburban areas, while many of the socialist era housing projects are gradually being transformed into social housing.

4. *New awareness of territorial identity and territorial interests* was awakened and became potent source of social and political mobilization. The processes of social individuation and fragmentation of institutional structures that were featuring post-Communist development, have also influenced the territorial structure of East Central European countries. This was manifested *inter alia* by the strengthening of localism and regionalism. Local governments have been splitting into minor units – in Czech Republic the number of local governments increased by 50% between 1989 and 1993 and a similar process took place also in Hungary and Slovakia. Local initiatives have mushroomed and local *memorabilia* have been recalled and newly revered. Elites in former or in potential new regional capitals have been claiming establishment of new administrative units or the renewal of long (sometimes not too long) forgotten historical regions. Regional political parties have been emerging, as an institutionalized form of regional interests. During the first years of transformation, in the temporary absence of any pronounced class interests, appeal to territorial identity was an easy way to mobilize people for political purposes.

5. *Functional diversification and social differentiation of spaces were deepened.* The official policy of the former regime aiming at »territorial homogenization« of the country, at the levelling of territorial economic and social differences – a policy applied with only a moderate success – has been dropped after 1989. Functional diversification of spaces, particularly in urban milieu, has rapidly proceeded – e.g. city cores have been losing residential function in favor of services, and also spaces became more clearly differentiated according to their status. The distinction between »good« and »bad« urban neighborhoods, »promising« and »not-so-promising« regions has gained in importance. The center-periphery and urban-rural cleavages have become more prominent and in some countries of the region a genuine territorial polarization occurred.³ Also personal spatial ranges became more status-dependent – for some social groups they were reduced (this is the case of inhabitants in small villages where public transportation was reduced or even discontinued after 1989), for others they were widened (the incredible boom of foreign travel has been mainly responsible for the extension).

6. *Spaces in East Central Europe were internationalized.* The influx of foreign tourists, guest workers, refugees, experts, criminals, firms, NGOs etc. that took place in the whole region after 1989 has brought foreigners to all possible corners of those societies, both public and private ones. The presence of foreigners is becoming commonplace even in remote areas, inside families and in other private groups. Moreover, foreign subjects (in some countries only institutions) are entitled to acquire and to own real estate property and thus to

become genuine participants in the local life. The almost magic meaning that had been attributed to state borders by the Communist state has been substantially weakened since 1989 due to deregulation of cross-border traffic, extensive reduction of visa requirements, intensification of cross-border contacts etc.

Internalization of domestic spaces has not been free of tensions. Locals frequently fear foreigners as potential competition, distrust foreign races and cultures, and display other signs of xenophobia. The years of relative isolation of East Central European countries from the outer world, their protection from the migration flows that had brought millions of Third World immigrants to West Europe have had their impact on the attitudes of the public. People are not used to cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. Moreover, historical experience of these countries – which were much too often invaded and dominated by their more powerful neighbors – has also played a role in shaping attitudes towards foreigners, particularly towards citizens of those countries where from aggression used to come in the past.

7. The geopolitical and economic re-orientation of East Central European states toward the Western Europe has caused *re-orientation of their internal spatial structures along the East-West axis*. Beside capital cities, it is, in general, the Western regions of these countries which have profited from the new situation and whose developmental chances have been improving in the last years, especially regions bordering with the West European countries, as well as the zones along East-West corridors. Fewer developmental stimuli have been coming from the East.

8. Last but not least, spatial development that followed after 1989 was in many respects *restoration of old spatial structures* that had existed before the Communists took over in the late forties and were later disrupted by the split of Europe into two blocs and by the forced subordination of East Central Europe to the imperial Soviet interests. Most (albeit not all) of the spatial relationships that were forged during the Comecon and Warsaw Pact period proved unstable and unsustainable after 1989 and they broke down together with the external forces that had shaped them. Old spatial structures – those from the pre-Communist time – have been frequently rehabilitated (in business, cultural contacts, inter-regional cooperation, political relationships as well as in private contacts). This testifies to the inertia of historically established spatial structures – not only of the physical ones, but also of the social and cultural structures.

Yet, this historicism must not be pushed too far. Old spatial structures can never be rebuilt as they had existed fifty years ago, if only because of the global

changes that have modified the whole stage. Moreover, some spatial changes caused by radical human interventions (e.g. the shift of the Polish state westward or the deportation of German minorities) are apparently irreversible.

While the concrete manifestation of the above spatial tendencies is specific in each East Central European country, the general picture has been much the same in all these countries.⁴

3. Czech Republic as a stage for spatial change

Recent spatial development in Czech Republic will be used in the following paragraphs to illustrate some of the above general observations.

The following four processes were the most relevant stimuli for the *regional* transformation in Czechia:

- The change in the geopolitical situation of the country and the split of Czechoslovakia.
- Democratization of public life, politics and territorial government.
- Changes in ownership rights and the inflow of foreign capital.
- The restructuring of economic activities.

3.1 The new geopolitical situation of the Czech Republic and the split of Czechoslovakia

The emancipation of Czechoslovakia from the Soviet bloc and the fall of the »iron curtain« meant a re-orientation of the country from the East toward the West Europe. This geopolitical change has had important consequences both for the external and the internal regional situation of the country.

Relative economic dynamism has been restored in the western part of Czech Republic, i.e. in Bohemia, where economic center of gravity of Czech lands had been situated for the last centuries. Inside Bohemia, its west, south and south-west border regions, until recently the dead ends of the Soviet bloc, are getting new developmental chances. The border areas along the Bavarian and Austrian frontiers, which suffered from their marginal position, can now capitalize on their proximity to the neighboring developed countries. Several military bases were abolished, opening their territories to civilian development. Border areas can become preferred target of foreign investment and attract tourist traffic. In general, this can be said about most of the south-west

Bohemian and south Bohemian districts. In several regions bordering with Germany, Austria and Poland, efforts to establish cross-border cooperation have been undertaken and sometimes institutionalized as »euroregions« (Zich 1993; Houžvička 1997).

On the other hand, some of the regions in Moravia (the eastern part of the Czech Republic) along the Slovak border, which until recently enjoyed good developmental chances and were some of the most socially and economically balanced areas of the country, turned borderlands after the split of Czechoslovakia and are in danger of gradually sliding into marginal position with little developmental stimuli from across the border. Full regional impact of division of Czechoslovakia has yet to be assessed. It certainly supported the shift of the Czech Republic's geopolitical economic center of gravity westward.

3.2 *The impact of democratization*

The democratization of politics, government and public life was attended by radical territorial decentralization and the introduction of territorial self-government in the municipalities. One of the unexpected consequences of this has been the rapid fragmentation of the existing territorial administrative structure. While the number of municipalities sharply increased⁵, the higher regional tier of administration (the regions) was abolished and a functional gap was opened between the state and the remaining lower regional tier (the districts). At the same time, the central authorities rejected most of the instruments used by the pre-1989-regime to stimulate and regulate territorial development, and are only reluctantly developing new methods compatible with a market economy. Central economic planning and its component part- regional economic planning – were abolished and the role of physical planning was down-graded. Spontaneous processes were given a much freer hand in territorial development. In general, it can be said that no systematic regional policy is being practiced at present.

Localism and regionalism surfaced after 1989 in the form of civic organizations, social movements and also political parties fostering regional interests. The majority of such activities are oriented toward economic and cultural goals. However, Moravian regionalism managed, for some time, to play a visible political role, after it became institutionalized in regional political parties.⁶ The issue of regionalism has become again salient within the discussions on the new regional political and administrative division of the country. At present, its influence has been diminishing.

3.3 The impacts of changes in ownership rights and of the inflow of foreign capital

Highly relevant for the transformation of regional structures are changes in the rights of real estate ownership, particularly ownership of houses and agricultural estates. Large state farms and agricultural cooperatives, which sometimes covered the territories of whole districts or substantial parts of them and which usually integrated several villages under one organizational unit, have been dismembered. The cooperative farms were either dissolved or transformed into genuine cooperatives. State farms were mostly transformed into joint-stock companies which, in turn, faced privatization.

Spatial economic relationships in the countryside, based so far on organizational structures of socialized agriculture, now are remodelled according to the demands of the market. Spatial organization of farming is reducing its scale and is again getting closer to the settlement structure. This increases somewhat the survival chance of the small settlements doomed to depopulation under the former regime.

The price of land, co-determined again by the market, is becoming an important locational factor. It can be observed that the internal structure of Czech cities has been changing as a consequence of the valorization of land and of differentiation of its prices. Spatial processes described by the urban ecology of western cities begin to function here again (Musil 1993, Šykora 1994). Gradually, housing is being reduced in the city centers, while banks, insurance companies, and other service sector businesses are moving in. Some activities are being relocated from the prohibitively expensive big cities to suburbia or to smaller and less expensive places. The first signs of socially segregated housing are becoming visible inside and around the cities. Suburbanization is progressing around the capital and other big cities as the new wealthy strata are looking for more comfortable housing. The socialist era urban housing projects whose population has been so far a social mix, are facing a socially selective out-migration. Gradually they will probably be transformed into social housing.

Spatially selective foreign investment is another important factor contributing to regional restructuring. It has been observed (sources of the Ministry of Privatization of the Czech Republic) that the largest volumes of foreign capital have gone or will go to Prague and vicinity, and next (in the mentioned rank-order) to the Central Bohemian region, to Brno and adjacent territories (South Moravian region), to the Ostrava area and to the southern part of the North Moravian region.⁷ Other reports have indicated that more intensive foreign activities have been taking place also in the west Bohemian area, in-

cluding the districts bordering with Germany (Andrle 1995). It can be said that a region is more attractive for foreign capital the nearer it is to Prague and to other large cities, the closer it is to the west border of the Czech Republic and the more urbanized it is.

3.4 The impact of the restructuring of economic activity

The Czech economy is in the middle of a process of restructuring. Some existing activities are being reduced (agricultural production in the first place), some were more-or-less interrupted (e.g. much of the electronic industry) and some strengthened (e.g. production of cars, the financial sector), while new activities, practically non-existent until 1990, have been opened (e.g. the publicity, consultancies).

Most of the structural changes are spatially selective and have differing impacts on different regions. It is some of the agricultural and the monoindustrial regions which proved most vulnerable in the process of the restructuring, while it is the biggest urban centers – and Prague in the first place, which enjoy the boom, mostly due to rapid development of the services.

Consequences of the economic restructuring are reflected inter alia in the regional differences of the living standard and of the labor market. There was no unemployment in the Czech Republic before 1990 or, it was rather hidden in over-employment. Since then, the unemployment rate was fluctuating, yet it has never exceeded 4.5% on the national average. Substantial deviations could be observed in Prague and vicinity (unemployment rate less than 1%) and in several districts with unemployment rate exceeding 6%.

3.5

Several more general issues were brought to light by post-communist regional development in the Czech Republic:

- a) The important question is whether and to what degree the new development after 1989 is going to change the existing regional patterns or, if it will follow them.
- b) If a more substantial change is to be expected, will the geopolitical shift in East-Central Europe and the transformation of Czech society tend to reactivate some of the pre-war regional patterns of the country?

- c) Should this be the case, how far this process will go and with which result will the reactivated long-term logic of regional development interact with the fundamental structural changes caused by the developments of the last fifty years?
- d) Will the economic transformation of Czech society increase its regional polarization, the cleavages between the developing and the stagnating or retrograding regions, the differences between the large urban centers and the rest of the country, as well as those between different zones within individual cities? Will the strong regions become stronger and the weak weaker?
- e) Will the long-lasting division of the country into the more developed (industrialized and urbanized) north and a less developed (more rural and agricultural) south – petrified by the »socialist industrialization« – be reversed in the future? Will the old industrialized regions in the north go into decline, while the less populated and less polluted regions in the south will attract more modern high-tech industries, services and population?
- f) Will a new regional polarization of the country develop along the west-east axis, with better developmental chances in the west?
- g) Will the country's regional structure, weakened by communist development, sustain the inevitable concomitants of Czech Republic's future membership in the European Union? Will it sustain, without losing internal cohesion, the unrestricted inflow of foreign labor, capital and goods as well as the pressures of the institutionalized European regionalism?

Only the next years will show, both in this country and in the rest of East Central Europe, what will be the final balance of spatial changes accompanying the processes of their transformation.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this paper were published in Illner/Andrle 1994 and Illner 1997.
- 2 We do not consider the two concepts as identical. Behind each of them stands a different idea on the nature of the changes in post-Communist countries. The word »transition« suggests that these societies move from one well defined model of society to another such model. On the other hand, the term »transformation« implies that a deep systemic change is taken place whose outcome is still open. We subscribe to the latter meaning.
- 3 This is the case of Hungary where the cleavage between the fast developing North-West and the stagnating North-East has reached a critical level.

- 4 In Poland, for instance, the territorially relevant restructuring of agriculture was not an issue and also the fragmentation of local governments did not occur on a scale comparable to Hungary and Czech Republic; in Hungary, on the other hand, a post-war turnover of population in its Western part had never been as massive as it was in Western Poland and Czech Republic.
- 5 A large part of municipalities split after 1989, increasing the fragmentation of the territorial administrative structure. The number of municipalities, somewhat more than four thousand at the end of 1989, became 50% higher within three years (there were 6,237 municipalities in 1992). More than 80% of municipalities have now less than 2000 population.
- 6 »The Movement for Self-Governing Democracy – Association for Moravia and Silesia«. This party which demanded strong regional autonomy for Moravia was enjoying support of 8-10% of the electorate on the national average and of some 20% in Moravia during the 1990 parliamentary elections. Since then its support decreased to 2-3% of adult population on the national average and 9-13% in Moravia itself. Later on the party split. Its largest successor was renamed to »Czecho-Moravian Centrist Party« and its support further diminished to 1.5 per cent and 3.6 per cent respectively (according to STEM survey of February 1994).
- 7 The records of the Ministry of Privatization included data both on the already »settled« capital as well as on investments planned for the subsequent three years 1994-1996. Incoming capital was localized in this statistics by the »enterprise method« (regionally dispersed economic units are registered as if located in the seat of the company) which means that its resulting territorial distribution need not be accurate.

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