

POST WAR (WWI) CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: TIME OF CIVILIZATIONAL CHOICE

Alexandr SYCH 

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine)

E-mail: amenitinna@gmail.com

Abstract. *The creation of the national states in the Central and Eastern Europe after First World War was of enormous importance to the peoples of this region. Nevertheless, despite the important issue of gaining their independence and sovereignty, the agenda of their social life at the time contained yet a really crucial issue. The peoples who received the right to statehood after the end of the war, at the same time had to solve another, no less important, problem, namely the choice of the form of this statehood, its social-political system and the model of economic development. This decision largely depended on the direction of the historical development of the states during the 20th century. We must recall that from the mid-17th century until the First World War, the population of a large European region (to the east of Oder) was in a state of economic and social stagnation. This situation is explained by the previous political and social-economic conditions, dependent on all aspects of historical development. That is why, at the beginning of the 20th century, most of the peoples who were part of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires have actually remained at the periphery of European civilization, lagging far behind industrial countries of Western Europe and North America, according to many indicators of social development. It was vital for the newly formed states of Central and Eastern Europe to choose the optimal model of a social system to compensate for the lost time and overcome the civilizational gap between them and the advanced Western countries. It is a matter of actual scientific analysis of how natural and justified this choice was.*

Keywords: *Central and Eastern Europe, civilization choice, modernization, nationalism, authoritarian dictatorships.*

Rezumat: *Europa Centrală și de Est după Primul Război Mondial: epoca opțiunii civilizationale. Crearea statelor naționale în Europa Centrală și de Est după Primul Război Mondial a avut o importanță enormă pentru popoarele din această regiune. În pofida acestui fapt, în ciuda importanței dobândirii independenței și suveranității, în agenda vieții lor sociale la vremea respectivă se afla încă o problemă cu adevărat crucială. Popoarele care au primit după sfârșitul războiului mondial dreptul la statalitate, în același timp trebuiau să soluționeze o altă, nu mai puțin importantă problemă, și anume: alegerea formei acestei statalități,*

sistemului ei social-politic și modelului de dezvoltare economică. De această hotărâre în mare măsură depindea direcția dezvoltării istorice a statelor în decursul secolului XX. Trebuie să reamintim că aproximativ de la mijlocul secolului al XVII-lea și până la Primul Război Mondial, populația unei mari regiuni europene (la est de Oder) se afla în condiții de stagnare economică și socială. Această situație se explica prin condițiile politice și social-economice anterioare, ne independente în toate aspectele dezvoltării istorice. De aceea, la începutul secolului al XX-lea majoritatea popoarelor care făceau parte din imperiile Austro-Ungar, German și Rus, au nimerit de fapt la periferia civilizației europene, rămânând în urmă după mai mulți indicatori ai dezvoltării sociale față de țările industriale din Europa de Vest și America de Nord. Pentru a recompensa timpul pierdut și pentru a depăși înapoierea sa, în aspectul civilizațional – în comparație cu țările occidentale înaintate – pentru statele nou formate din Europa Centrală și de Est a fost vital să se aleagă cel mai optim model al sistemului social. Este cunoscut faptul că statele nou formate din Europa Centrală și de Est au optat pentru modelul occidental, liberal-democratic al orânduirii sociale. O analiză științifică imparțială a dezvoltării lor istorice în perioada interbelică ne ajută să înțelegem cât de logică și justificată a fost această alegere.

Résumé : L'Europe Centrale et Orientale après la Première guerre mondiale : le temps d'un choix civilisateur. La création des états nationaux en Europe Centrale et Orientale après la Première guerre mondiale revêtait une signification primordiale pour les peuples de cette région. Cependant, malgré l'importance de l'acquisition de l'indépendance et de la souveraineté nationale, à l'ordre du jour de leur vie sociale à cette époque-là, se trouvait encore une question, vraiment cruciale. Les peuples ayant obtenu le droit à leur propre structure d'état après la fin de cette guerre, devaient résoudre en même temps un autre problème, non moins important, à savoir, choisir une forme de cet état, son régime socio-politique ainsi qu'un modèle de son développement économique. De sa solution dépendait, en majeure partie, la direction de leur développement historique ultérieur au XX siècle. Il convient de rappeler qu'environ de la moitié du XVII siècle jusqu'à la Première guerre mondiale, la population d'une grande région de l'Europe (à l'est de l'Oder) se trouvait dans des conditions d'une stagnation économique et sociale. Cette situation s'expliquait par les conditions politiques et socio-économiques de leur développement historique antérieur, non autonome sous tous les aspects. Par conséquent, au début du XX siècle, la plupart des peuples qui se trouvaient au sein des Empires austro-hongrois, allemand et russe, se sont trouvés en réalité à la périphérie de la civilisation européenne, en cédant en plupart des indicateurs de leur développement social aux pays industrialisés de l'Europe Occidentale et de l'Amérique du Nord. Pour rattraper le temps perdu et surmonter leur retard civilisateur, en comparaison avec les pays développés de l'Occident, les pays nouvellement créés de l'Europe Centrale et Orientale devaient choisir un modèle optimal du système social. Comme on le sait, les états nouvellement créés de l'Europe Centrale et Orientale ont choisi le modèle occidental, c'est-à-dire, démocratique et libéral, de leur développement social. Une analyse scientifique impartiale de leur développement historique pendant l'entre-deux-guerres permet de comprendre à quel point ce choix, s'est avéré logique et justifié.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of national states in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War was of great importance to the peoples of this region. However, despite the importance of independence and state sovereignty, there was still one crucial question on the agenda of their social existence at that time. The peoples who have the right to their own statehood after World War I, that heralded a new era of peace, had to solve another but no less important problem, namely to choose the form of their states, their socio-political system and model of economic development. In other words, the direction of their further historical development and the fate of national existence largely depended on the solution to this problem, which may be called the problem of *civilizational choice*.

It should be recalled that in the early twentieth century most of the peoples, who were citizens of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires, were actually on the periphery of European civilization, significantly lagging behind, on most indicators of social development, compared to industrial countries of Western Europe and North America.¹ It was vital for the newly formed states of Central and Eastern Europe to choose the most optimal model of their social system in order to make up for the lost time and overcome this *civilizational gap* between them and the advanced Western countries. The solution to this problem seemed obvious: the choice should have been made in favour of a western liberal democracy with market economies – a new growth model, which at that time proved to be undeniably advantageous. This problem received substantial interest, because modernization of societies implies the emulation of the Western civilization paradigm, i.e. the introduction of the liberal democratic policy, the advancement of industrialization and the development of the market relations, which became crucial in addressing the problem. By the way, the historical context of modernization of the Central-Eastern European region drew the attention of an increasing number of researchers.²

However, before modernization, the first and foremost challenge was to gain freedom and independence, to establish its own state, and therefore create

¹ See more: Derek Aldcroft, *Europe's Third World. The European Periphery in the Interwar Years*, Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2006, p. 4 - 14.

² See for example: Jacek Kochanowicz, *Backwardness and Modernization: Poland and Eastern Europe in the 16th - 20th Centuries* (Variorum collected studies series), Aldershot (GB), Burlington (USA), 2006, 336 p.

favourable conditions for 'catch-up development'. It seemed that the results of WWI gave such a chance.

ARGUMENTATION

As we know, throughout the long period (approximately from the middle of the 17th century and before WWI), the population of the broad region (to the east of Oder) lived in the conditions of economic and social underdevelopment and oppression, one of the main reasons why it was so called 'the second edition of serfdom'. A contemporary researcher of the Western civilization noted: "Between 1600 and 1650 the practice of tying peasants to their masters' land spread to Poland, the Baltic provinces, Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia and Austria. ... As well as instituting a life of unremitting toil and loss of liberties for millions of people, the introduction of serfdom announced centuries of economic and social stagnation, creating a divergence between eastern and western Europe"³. Such a situation was aggravated by the conditions of the *traditional society*, which was characteristic for Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian), German and Russian empires. Therefore, the majority of the peoples of these empires have actually emerged at the periphery of European civilization, lagging far behind industrial countries of Western Europe and North America according to the majority of indicators of public progress.

It is worth reminding that on the eve of the war of 1914 – 1918, there were two civilizational models on the European continent: the Western one (or liberal democratic), which was represented by the UK and France (and the overseas power - the USA, which was on the side of the Entente allies), and the Central European one (or the military-authoritarian and conservative-monarchist), typical for Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Until the end of the WWI, there was one more, completely new civilizational perspective proposed by Soviet Russia.

The Great War has drastically altered the map of Central and Eastern Europe. The empires of Habsburgs, Romanovs and Hohenzollerns have broken up due to World War I, and nine new independent states appeared or reappeared in Europe. Having exercised the right of nations to self-determination (or the so-called Wilsonian "principle of nationality"), it was vital for the newly formed states of Central and Eastern Europe to choose the optimal public model of statehood, to make up for a downtime and to overcome, in fact, *the civilizational gap* between them and the advanced countries of the Western world. The newly formed states

³ Roger Osborne, *Civilization: A New History of the Western World*, New York: Pegasus Books, 2006, p. 250.

of Central and Eastern Europe have made a choice in favour of the Western civilization model, that is, the liberal-democratic social model with a market economy. Such a choice can be explained by at least three circumstances.

Firstly, the selection is significant, and perhaps crucially determined by the main result of the WWI, namely, the victory of the Entente and the United States; in other words, all eyes were on the winners.

Secondly, the local representatives of, first and foremost, the intellectual elite, which, in fact, led the national liberation movement of the peoples of the region, had adhered to the Pro-Western, liberal-democratic orientation (one of the most striking examples was Tomáš Masaryk, the first President of the Czechoslovak Republic⁴).

Thirdly, the political map of Central and Eastern Europe and the fate of its peoples were determined during the Paris Peace Conference by the winners in the First World War. By agreeing to create new states and internationally acknowledge their legal status, it obvious that the leading Western countries primarily pursued their own geopolitical interests and goals, in particular in order to strengthen their political influence in the Central-Eastern European region.

The treaty makers of Paris were guided in 1919 by the principle of self-determination in the case of the post-war settlement grounds in Central and Eastern Europe. However, as Winston Churchill remarked in his *World Crisis*, "But if the principle was simple and accepted, its application was difficult and disputable"⁵. That is why the right to establish statehood, by this principle, was enjoyed only by those, who were supposed to 'deserve' such honour, from the point of view of the "architects of Versailles", i.e. the peacemakers were inclined to reward or punish the new or restored states according to whether or not they had supported the winning side. It is also worth taking into account that the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were created as a barrier to the westward expansion of Soviet Communism and as a threat in the rear to deter German revival. On the other hand, the Western leaders repeatedly violated the principle of self-determination by themselves or turned a blind eye to the others, for example, restored Poland.

It should be noted that the leaders of the great powers reached a post-war settlement in this region; but they absolutely disregarded the whole set of complicated circumstances that determined its specificity: confessional, national, social and other. As the famous historian, Eric Hobsbawm, noted at the time, "This brief glance immediately reveals the utter impracticability of the Wilsonian principle to

⁴ George J. Kovtun (Ed.), *The spirit of Tomáš G. Masarik (1850- 1937): An anthology*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1990, p. 13.

⁵ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*. Vol. IV, *The Aftermath*, London: Thornton, 1929, p. 205.

make state frontiers coincide with the frontiers of nationality and language”⁶. Moreover, such policy of the post-war settlement generated “the irritations which have arisen wherever these sensitive and doubtful fringes of nationality have been roughly clipped by frontier scissors...”⁷. The treaties of the Paris Peace Conference, in fact, violated the principles of national self-determination by leaving significant groups of minorities outside the borders of their national homelands. According to the Trianon Treaty (1920), Hungary lost nearly 3/4 of its pre-war territory, and about 2/3 of its pre-war population⁸, but in fact more than 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians became a part of the neighbouring states and accounted for 1/4 or even 1/3 of the total Hungarian population. Therefore, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the status of the Trianon Treaty represented the crippling of historical Hungary for the Hungarians, a disaster that has lessened the geopolitical status of Hungary in the region, and has also physically divided many families⁹.

The leading Western countries considered it important to eliminate the legacy of authoritarian empires and to speed up the processes of democratization in new countries. The terms of peace settlement did concertedly promote democracy and had spurred the establishment of representative regimes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. So, the ‘architects’ of the post-war terms have openly declared their interest in promoting democracy and the emergence of representative regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

Thus, the Western democracies have really provided the peoples of Central and Eastern European not only with the right and conditions for the creation of a national statehood and its international recognition, but also with the explicitly proposed model of socio-political system of the Western side, of course. Its adoption and implementation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did create favourable conditions to increase or speed-up (depending on the country) the modernization processes in the sphere of socio-economic and political relations, culture, spiritual life, on the principles of liberal democracy and market economy, that would mean a paradigm shift of their civilizational development.

Therefore, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe got the chance to follow in the footsteps of another civilizational model. It was a time of a truly historic

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 132 - 133.

⁷ Winston Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁸ M. Wesley Shoemaker, *The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 1989*, Washington, Stryker-Post Publications, 1990, p. 133.

⁹ Dagmar Kusá, *We Are the Stories We Tell. Historical Conciliation of Ethnic Tensions in Central Europe*, in “Visegrad Insight”, 2013, No. 1(3), p. 17.

choice for their future. Nevertheless, this raises a number of questions:

1) was this choice of these peoples who had to live in a largely new social system voluntary or was it programmed by the will of 'architects' of the post-war world?

2) was it made by the people or peoples of the newly formed states of Central and Eastern Europe or - in the first place - by the leaders of national liberation movements, representatives of local liberal democratic (Pro-Western) elites, especially the intellectual ones?

3) was mass, conscious and unanimity an extent of public support of this choice or, using the terminology of political scientists, was this support purely situational?

4) were there objective and subjective prerequisites and conditions for such a choice or was it primarily determined by the results of the WWI, namely, the victory of the Entente and the USA, which represented the model of industrial society?

That is why it is important to analyse the political and socio-economic development of the new or reconstituted states of Central-Eastern Europe in the interwar period through the lens of the chosen civilizational paradigm. Such unbiased scientific analysis could facilitate our understanding of how natural and justified this choice was.

After WWI, the modernization reforms along the Western lines (industrialization, an introduction of democratic procedures, basics of parliamentarism and other) began in the countries of this region. All states adopted new constitutions and set up parliamentary regimes by Western standards, in some cases where none had existed before. In the immediate aftermath of First World War, liberal democracy - one of the key elements of modernization in Central and Eastern Europe was broadly considered the superior form of government. Western democracy was pitted against a backward order of quasi-feudal authoritarianism, a spirit of democratic progress flourished and "Western guarantees to the new states created by the Versailles Treaty went hand in hand with the promotion of Western constitutional models"¹⁰.

Therefore, an important component of the process of West-oriented modernization was democratization. In this regard, we concur with the authors of an interesting article on interwar in East Central Europe, when they conclude that democratization meant a fundamental transformation from corporate and strictly hierarchically organized societies into societies with equal rights for all ethnic and social groups¹¹. However, we can hardly agree with their statement that "the claim

¹⁰ Jacques Rupnik, *Eastern Europe: The International Context*, in "Journal of Democracy", 11, 2000, No. 2, p. 117.

¹¹ Heidi Hein-Kircher, St. Kailitz, "Double transformations:" nation formation and

for democracy became an inherent, unquestioned part of the claim for new self-determined nations in East Central Europe”¹². We assume that the prowess for democratization, characteristic for the pro-Western elites that stood at the helm of the newly formed states, did not reflect the social mood of the broad masses of the population, which had lived for centuries under an authoritarian society. By the way, the same authors rightly notice that “national” values were prioritized over “democratic” values and, hence, nationalizing politics undermined or even impeded “democratic consolidation”. Moreover, they recognize the complexity of the “process of democratization in territories where democratic ideas and civil society had not yet taken root”¹³.

Although the process of democratization has caused significant changes in the socio-political life of Central and Eastern European countries, it was unable to fundamentally change the political culture, the norms of social behaviour and the traditions inherent to their population (with the exception of Czechoslovakia, albeit with some reservations). Under the influence of the Western democracies’ victory in the war of 1914-1918, an attempt was made to transfer and to adopt constitutions of the French-type (and here and there of British- and Swiss-type) and political structures in the mentioned region. However, as John Lukacs, a famous Hungarian-born American historian, wittily noted: “But these foreign-style suits did not fit the stocky bodies of their temporary customers. The seams soon broke. The cloth did not last. That kind of parliamentary liberalism belonged to the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. Fourteen years, at the most, after 1920 the majority of Eastern and Southern European countries... had abandoned parliamentary democracy (Note that this happened even before Hitler’s Third Reich would influence, or force, such a change upon them)”¹⁴.

The period of modernization was minimized by a number of reasons such as monarchism, government centralism, tough social control, corporatism, clericalism, commitment to social stability and order, negative attitude to innovations, traditionalism. These phenomena of specific political and legal culture were inherited by the so-called Successor States, as a result of disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires, to which some peoples belonged during some centuries. This imperial legacy (in fact, the legacy of agrarian or

democratization in interwar East Central Europe, in “Nationalities Papers”, 2018, Vol. 46, No. 5, p. 745.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 746.

¹⁴ John Lukacs, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*, New York, Ticknor & Fields, 1993, p. 158-159.

traditional society) fatally affected the fate of the civilizational choice made by these states. In addition, consolidating and stabilizing the new creations in Eastern Europe proved a difficult task, given the weak, often corrupt and unstable administrations, the lack of experience in democratic methods, a plethora of parties, whose confrontation and struggle gave rise to general political instability (between 1919 and 1926 there were 14 governments only in Poland), and the problem of reconciling divergent interests, many of which arose from the ethnic and religious diversity of the populations¹⁵.

Thus, despite the importance of the constitutional establishment of civil rights and freedoms, the multi-party system and parliamentarism which seemed to have been introduced into the political life of these states, it should be recognized that that process could not eliminate the authoritarian political culture of a traditionally-established society. There was also the lack of deep preconditions in the public consciousness for the perception and dissemination of liberal-democratic ideology, which made the process of democratization superficial and unstable.

As it turned out, the post-war politicization of the masses turned out to be mostly impulsive-emotional in nature, due to the general euphoria, which accompanied the breakdown of the former imperial statehood and gaining of independence, rather than awareness of painstaking work, aimed at the development of a new socio-political system that required a completely different level of civic responsibility. As it used to be before, the broad strata of the population were psychologically unprepared for active participation in the socio-political life within the framework of the new constitutional and legal system. On the other hand, the old aristocrats and landowners still had a considerable power and were against the modernization processes. In his recent paper, Florian Kührer-Wielach concluded: "the established Romanian political class could not live up to the high expectations of modernization and social advancement"¹⁶. His remark should be considered true in relation to other countries of Central-Eastern European region. Regrettably, new democratic governments could not solve the problems, faced during the modernization reforms. Despite a democratic form of government, conflicts between various parties and their leaders kept it from being very effective.

It is important to highlight the fact that democratization of social and political life could be more successful and, consequently, gain more substantial public support if it was backed up by tangible achievements in the socio-economic realm.

¹⁵ Derek Aldcroft, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Florian Kührer-Wielach, *The Transylvanian promise: political mobilisation, unfulfilled hope and the rise of authoritarianism in interwar Romania*, in "European Review of History – Revue européenne d'histoire", Vol. 23, 2016, No. 4, p. 590.

Unfortunately, the post-war economic situation was difficult and unfavourable for carrying out deep economic reforms. The disintegration of the economic space of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, that meant the loss of established markets, the rupture of communications which developed for decades, the disappearance of one financial system and so forth, had a negative impact on the economic development of the Central-Eastern European countries. As Paul Kennedy wrote, "The economic scene in eastern and central Europe made matters even worse, since the erection of customs and tariff barriers around these newly created countries increased regional rivalries and hindered general development. There were now twenty-seven separate currencies in Europe instead of fourteen as before the war, and an extra 12.500 miles of frontier; many of the borders separated factories from their raw materials, ironworks from their coalfields, farms from their market"¹⁷.

Despite certain successes of the first wave of reforms, the plans of accelerated modernization of the Central-Eastern European region in accordance with the Western model were not implemented. The overwhelming majority of the population was not able to quickly get used to the dynamic changes and contradictory manifestations of the modernization process, which, in their turn, not only slowed down the pace of reforms, but also significantly reduced their real economic effect, increased government expenses on their implementation, and generated social tension in the society.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in a while such accelerated modernization 'directed from above' by a fairly narrow circle of representatives of the liberal-democratic elite, aiming at breaking down the very foundations of the society, began to face ever-growing resistance from traditional segments of the population and conservative political forces.

In our opinion, another factor that had a fatal impact on modernization processes in general and on the fate of democracy in particular was *nationalism*, which went viral with the Central-Eastern European countries' ruling elites, without realizing that in the 20th century this phenomenon is inherently incompatible with real democracy. Assessing the post-war situation, Winston Churchill considered¹⁸, "The almost complete exclusion of religion in all its forms from the political sphere had left Nationalism the most powerful moulding instrument of mankind in temporal

¹⁷ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Glasgow, Fontana Press, 1989, p. 373. See also: Stefan Karner, *From Empire to Republic: Economic Problems in a Period of Collapse, Reorientation, and Reconstruction*, in John Komlos (Ed.), *Economic development in the Habsburg monarchy and in the Successor States. Essays*, New York, East European Monographs, 1990.

¹⁸ Winston Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 203 - 204.

affairs". Oddly enough, but the Great Powers, interested in promoting democracy in these countries, in fact, paved the way for the strengthening of nationalism and underestimated the danger of this phenomenon in the interwar period.

As we know, all new nation-states in the Central-Eastern European region were created within multi-ethnic territories. However, in all of these states, as a result of policies of the nationalist-minded ruling class, large parts of the population were intentionally and quite officially defined as "minorities", which had to accept their unequal position compared with the dominant position of the ethnic majority. Thus, after the WWI many national minorities were denied the right to their own statehood or a kind of autonomy in the newly formed states. Moreover, often their civil and cultural rights were more reduced than during their stay in the collapsed empires. Of course, they demanded some kind of influence in the newly formed states, while dominant national groups (and first of all their elites) strongly opposed such demands.

As it turned out, the nationalism of small nations which established their statehood after WWI was equally intolerant and aggressive, as the great-power chauvinism of collapsed empires, where they were oppressed. Moreover, since the First World War, nationalism had essentially become the composition and even the basis of ideology in newly formed countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It had become a factor of both internal and external instability of these states.

Firstly, nationalism negatively influenced the national problem and actually has maintained and even intensified the discrimination of ethnic minorities by the representatives of the titular nation. Conflicts between ethnic groups were not at all brought to an end by the Paris Peace Conference, which established minority rights and protection. The same W. Churchill testified: "It should be added that in all the treaties constituting the frontiers of the new States precise and elaborate provisions were inserted and accepted providing for the protection of minorities, their good treatment and equal rights before the law. Unfortunately, the governments of these newly-established states factually ignored these provisions"¹⁹. The main principles of the peace treaties were perceived by the newly emerging states and their respective dominant nations as being imposed on them by the victors in World War I. Therefore, conflicts over minority rights rose. First and foremost, it is worth mentioning the oppression of the Ukrainians, the Jews and the Germans in Poland.

In Romania, according to the 1930 census, the minorities comprised 28% of the population. Despite the relevant articles of the Constitution of Romania and the 1924 Law on nationalities, the Romanian government also had serious

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228-229.

problems with their ethnic groups and minorities, especially the Hungarians, which, dissatisfied with the land reform in Transylvania, the laws on education etc., between 1923 and 1940 submitted 47 complaints to the League of Nations²⁰.

Czechoslovakia, in fact, was also a collection of minorities led by the Czechs, where even the Slovaks did not feel very comfortable. It is known that their new capital – Bratislava – was first inhabited by mainly Germans and Hungarians, and not by Slovaks, and in 1930 ethnic minorities were almost a third of the population of Slovakia²¹. The Slovaks insisted that the term “Czechoslovak nation” was no more than a cover-up for Czech-dominated centralization of government²². All attempts of the Slovak political elite to obtain autonomy in the 1920s were in vain, and the problem of real autonomy for Slovakia remained open until 1938²³.

The national unity in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was also only apparent. In fact, as Derek H. Aldcroft noted, the ethnic problems of the new Yugoslav state were exacerbated by the fact that the Serbs, who represented about 40 percent of the population, tended to monopolize the positions of power within government and administration and paid lip-service to the interests of their minority nationals²⁴. In the 1920s, the conflict has intensified between Serbs and Croats over the matter of principle that has to be fundamental in the building of a country: the first ones defended centralism, the second ones – federalism²⁵. Changing the name of the country to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia did not stop the disagreement and fight between the peoples of this state.

Secondly, nationalism posed a continuous threat to democratic institutions, as democracy is inherently incompatible with the nationalism of the twentieth century because it only pays attention to the own nation and it is often hostile to people of other nations. As H. Hein-Kircher and St. Kailitz rightly point out in their recent paper, “nationalism became a kind of state doctrine, which deeply influenced internal politics and eventually derailed the ongoing efforts of democratization”²⁶. For that reason, nationalism became an important factor that contributed to the failure of democracy in Eastern and Central Europe and to their transition to authoritarian

²⁰ Ion Bulei, *A Short History of Romania, Second edition*, Bucharest, MERONIA Publishers, 1998, p.121.

²¹ Elena Mannova (Ed.), *A Concise History of Slovakia*, Bratislava, Academic Electronic Press, 2000, p. 244.

²² M. Welsey Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²³ Elena Mannova (Ed.), *A Concise History of Slovakia*, p. 246.

²⁴ Derek Aldcroft, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁵ M. Welsey Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

²⁶ Heidi Hein-Kircher, Steffen Kailitz, *op. cit.*, p. 746 - 747.

and even pro-fascist dictatorships with nationalist overtones.

Thirdly, nationalism as part of state ideology and social life influenced the foreign policy making of Central-Eastern countries, which often led to a deterioration of bilateral relations, territorial claims, etc. Contrary to the hopes of many, in the context of post-imperial realities and the inertia of traditional society, the process of democratic transition exacerbated ethnic polarization and conflicts. Thus, the unsolved problems of ethnic minorities and the so-called 'unfair' borders became the source of permanent instability both in the countries of the aforesaid region and between them. This fact was used by aggressive fascist powers in the 1930s.

Therefore, the ferocious nationalism became probably one of the main reasons for long-lasting uncertainty in the states of Central and Eastern Europe, adding to the arsenal of leaders of the national movement, who happened to come to power in these countries.

Since the mid-1920s the new democracy regimes in Central-Eastern Europe were overwhelmed by the right-wing or nationalist forces and one by one they succumbed to authoritarian rule. Both right-wing authoritarian and even fascist ideas grew more influential across Central-Eastern European countries from the second half of the 1920s, attracting adherents from different layers of society. The presumed revolutionary threat from Soviet Communism, the separatist tendencies of the national minorities, the weakness of parliamentary democracy suffering from party fragmentation and constant governmental instability, and the political debility of traditional elites only reinforced this trend.

In 1926 general Joseph Pilsudski led his armed followers to Warsaw and factually staged the coup d'état. They gained control of the most important government buildings during two days of street fighting which saw nearly 400 people killed and over 900 wounded²⁷. Within a few days, Pilsudski was in control of the government. While he did not disband the Polish parliament, electoral manipulations yielded majority support for his policy. He installed what one might today call an "electoral authoritarian" regime²⁸. Although he held various offices in the government from time to time, he was really the dictator of Poland until his death in 1935.

Much the same thing was true in the other countries of Central-Eastern Europe. There were various kinds of dictatorships – both military and royal dictatorships. Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia were all monarchies in which the

²⁷ Andrzej Misiuk, *Police and Policing under the Second Polish Republic, 1918 – 39*, in Gerald Blaney, Jr. (Ed.), *Policing Interwar Europe: continuity, change, and crisis, 1918-40*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 165.

²⁸ Agnes Cornell, Jørgen Møller, Svend-Erik Skaaning, *The Real Lessons of the Interwar Years*, in "Journal of Democracy", Vol. 28, 2017, No. 3, p. 14-28.

king set up a royal dictatorship.

For instance, in Romania, the increasingly authoritarian tendencies were associated with the accession to the throne of Carol II in 1930, who relied on the National Peasants' Party (the former agrarians who made the ideological drift towards nationalism and anti-liberalism) and paramilitaries of the "Iron Guard", which received royal subsidies. The latter genuinely adhered to the pro-fascist, anti-Semitic, anti-Communist and – that is significant! – anti-Western attitudes and their activities deliberately resorted to the practice of political assassinations, Prime Minister Ion G. Duca, the leader of the Liberal Party, Prime Minister Armand Calinescu and many others after that were their victims²⁹. Also, an alarming phenomenon was the increase in the public support of the "Iron Guard", which gained about 16% of the votes in the 1937 elections, becoming the third political force in the Parliament. Soon the government was threatened by the "Iron Guard", which had the support of Nazi Germany.

The Baltic states also adopted authoritarian versions of regimes: Lithuania came under the control of Smetona in 1926, i.e. went down much the same road as neighbouring Poland, and Latvia and Estonia fell to Ulmanis and Pāts respectively in 1934.

It is important to bear in mind that 'ethnic nationalism was to become an important force in fascist movements in these countries'³⁰. Beginning in the late 1920s a number of fascist-inspired parties with ultranationalist ideology became influential in this region (the Iron Guard in Romania, the Iron Wolf movement in Lithuania, the Arrow Cross in Hungary, the Estonian Freedom Fighters, and the Latvian Thunder Cross). In turn, as Kurt Weyland (University of Texas) observed, "the messianic ideology of fascism contributed greatly to the massive reverse wave that undermined many democratic advances achieved in the wake of World War I"³¹. As a result, many of these authoritative regimes were close to fascism and may be called as pro-fascist or semi-fascist.

Nevertheless, after fifteen years since the First World War ended, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, not one of the states created or reorganized at the Paris Peace Conference remained a democracy³². Therefore, in the author's opinion,

²⁹ Ion Bulei, *op. cit.*, p. 119-120.

³⁰ Robert Bideleux, Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change*. London, Routledge, 1998, p. 491.

³¹ Kurt Weyland, *Fascism's missionary ideology and the autocratic wave of the interwar years*, "Democratization", Vol. 24, 2017, Issue 7, p. 3.

³² Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present*. Third Edition, New York - London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1984, p. 175.

the 'nationalistic flavour' of the formation of the new states in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War is largely predetermined by the decline of the democratic regimes and institutes and the establishment of the authoritarian pro-fascist dictatorships. Since the mid-1920s, there was a number of coups d'états and dictatorial regimes were established in these countries. "Hopes for democratic consolidation in East Central Europe were quickly dashed as a massive authoritarian backlash followed the wave of democratization"³³. This, however, not only changed the nature of the political development of the countries but also led to the final curtailment of modernization reforms initiated after the First World War.

In the wake of the exacerbation of socio-economic problems, as a result of the modernization reforms that led to the breakdown of established forms of existence, the desire to return to the usual way of life was born in the masses, seeing the head of state as a 'powerful man' capable of restoring order and counter the reformist ardour of pro-Western politicians. For the vast majority, patriarchal moral values and nationalist slogans were closer and more understandable rather than the borrowed ones, i.e. liberal-democratic ideas with such concepts as civic responsibility, freedom of individual choice, human rights, introduced from the outside. This social and political orientation of the majority of the population, inherited from imperial times, became an important reason for the weakness of democratic institutions and, as a consequence, led to the noticeable strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in the political life of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, after the First World War, some nations of Central and Eastern Europe, having obtained their own statehood, got a historical chance to move to the development of a new society (with a democratic system of public administration, with market economy, etc.) based on the model of the leading countries of Western Europe and North America. However, the democratization of the social and political system, mainly due to external pressure, turned out to be quite formal and superficial. We speculate that this might be due to the fact that the majority of the population did not accept it or, rather, was not ready for it, captive of traditional ideas and stereotypes inherited from the imperial legacy. Soon, literally in 5-7 years, the superficiality of democratic transformations in Central-Eastern Europe became apparent. The archaic social structure (the predominance of peasantry, the sharp reduction of the aristocracy as a result of the World War, the

³³ Heidi Hein-Kircher, Steffen Kailitz, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

relatively insignificant working class, the social heterogeneity of the bourgeoisie), the complexity of national relations and the growing discontent of national minorities), the unstable socio-economic situation, the lack of real national-state unity (the regionalism problems inherited from the imperial past) resulted in the powerlessness of those political forces that have received the power after WWI to govern in a democratic way. Therefore, from the very beginning, the most aggressive and cohesive political groups in this part of Europe were inclined towards dictatorial, authoritarian ways of governing. Consequently, the relatively rapid evolution of the political system – from democracy to authoritarianism – was largely ‘programmed’ by the insurmountable imperial heritage, which affected the public consciousness, the social psychology, the political practice, and the national policies of Central and Eastern European states throughout the interwar period. The nationalism became another reason for such evolution and it had a negative impact on the fate of democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the interwar period.

Proceeding from it, it is possible to draw an obvious conclusion that the civilizational choice made by the Central-Eastern European countries after WWI, – from the point of view of carrying out the socio-political and economic modernization of the Western model, – turned out to be short-lived and generally ineffective (with the exception of Czechoslovakia). Consequently, according to Winston Churchill, “Central and Southern Europe had broken into intensely nationalistic fragments sundered from each other by enmities and jealousies, by particularist tariffs and local armaments”³⁴. There were states with low levels of socio-economic modernization, politically divisive ethnolinguistic cleavages, and limited – and generally unsuccessful – experience with democracy.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that the Central European region did not take advantage of this new civilization experience. Even a short stay in a democratic system initiated the process of setting the foundations for a modern civil society, and the authoritarian dictatorships established by conservative forces could not fully restore the traditional society and solve the urgent problems. Moreover, the rulers of these authoritarian regimes involved their countries into the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany, placing them, thus, on the brink of a national catastrophe. Therefore, after WWII, the issue of civilizational choice was again on the agenda of their state and national existence.

³⁴ Winston Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 455.