

## **HEADLINE: Central Europe as a Community of Shared Aspirations**

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A new decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has just opened. A decade of uncertainty brought forth by the global pandemic and its consequences, but also a decade of hope. A decade of opportunities for the civilization's and economy's recovery, a chance to create a world that is better, more just, more green, and one that respects the principles of sustained development. As we look towards the future, we are looking for areas which will be the centers of dynamic and positive changes. I am certain that Central Europe will be one of them on the European and global scale.

Central Europe or Central and Eastern Europe (the terms are used interchangeably) is a significant regional entity, a community of shared fate in terms of geography, politics, and economy as well as in terms of ideas and cultures. As for a location on a map, it is perceived as an area between the Baltic, Adriatic, and the Black seas or (even though it is oversimplification) between Germany and Russia. But above all, we constitute a circle of common memory. We have had our share of similar historical experiences, in the dramatic 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular. We have suffered from two totalitarianisms, the brown and red ones, that suppressed and oppressed us. But we also have great, glorious experiences from centuries ago. The 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the era called "the Europe of the Jagiellonian dynasty" to be later named the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, saw a flourishing of a voluntary political union in a substantial part of the territory, a precursor to the European Union of today, which was a friendly home to many cultures and faiths and which respected the rule of law, parliamentarianism, and democracy. We are carrying lessons from those experiences – both good and bad – into the future as a universal warning as well as inspiration to work towards a common good, the prosperity of the region and all the integrated Europe.

A description of Central Europe in terms of values is important as well. Being part of Western civilization for more than a thousand years, we share its ideological foundations. Milan Kundera suggestively named Central Europe "a kidnapped West," that is the part of Western civilization that found itself against its will under the Soviet domination – imperial, authoritarian, and unable to manage rationally. It must be emphasized, though, that our commitment to values that have built the European culture is not without reflection. We know perhaps better than others the high price one must pay for defending them. We are aware that one must cultivate and reconcile freedom and

responsibility, rights and duties, individualism and solidarity, the attitude of criticism, innovation, and modernization with one that cherishes heritage and traditions that describe our identity.

On the threshold of the historic breakthrough of 1989, Timothy Garton Ash wrote that the concept of Central Europe has roused the Western world from thinking in Cold War terms, has challenged the common notions and priorities but also had something new to offer in return. This opinion seems to be valid today as well when the participation of Central European countries in the EU and NATO is a crucial and solidified part of the European and Atlantic order, and as our region with its solid economic growth has made a significant civilization leap. Also today, the concept of Central Europe contains dynamism and positive content. If I were to concisely present the modern face of Central Europe, including Poland as the biggest country in the region, I would say as follows: it is the community of shared success and the community of shared aspirations at the same time.

Central Europe constitutes a perfect example of how powerful and creative power freedom is. Freedom and its siblings – economic freedom, entrepreneurship, self-government, open up the space for fulfillment of bold ambitions and aspirations. Development accompanies the progress of freedom. The three decades that have passed since the fall of communism, the regional breakthrough initiated by the Polish “Solidarity” movement, are the story of the great economic success, of a social and civilization advancement that hardly ever happened over such a short time in the world history. Poland and the whole of Central Europe are a fascinating testimony to opportunities that come with freedom.

We can also serve as an inspiring example of how cooperation, joint initiatives and undertakings bring positive results. It was thanks to them that Central Europe ceased to be, as it was in adverse times, a peripheral area between the West and East, between imperial powers, and instead became a structure connected by multiple ties, one that is aware of its interests and has an influence on the course of European affairs. The emancipation of Central and Eastern Europe was a success, we are the crucial part of political and civilization processes.

Let me draw your attention to three important planes of Central European cooperation, which are not only of regional significance but are also crucial in the EU, Atlantic, and even global dimension. The first of them is the Visegrad Group, an entity of the longest existence which gathers Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Initiated in 1991 as a platform for political dialogue and coordination of efforts to gain membership in NATO and the EU, the Visegrad Group has also proven

useful once it has achieved these strategic goals. Today it is one of the most important agents in activating regional cooperation in Central Europe and seeking understanding on European affairs.

The second of the planes is the Bucharest Nine, a structure that groups countries of NATO's eastern flank: Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Bulgaria. It was established in 2015 in Bucharest, where we signed a joint statement which said the Bucharest Nine countries join efforts to secure, where it is necessary, a "robust, credible and sustainable Allied military presence" in the region. To a large degree, the B9 is a response to Russia's aggressive policy, to the violations of borders and territorial integrity of the neighboring Ukraine, which threaten a regional and Atlantic security. We are not going to watch it idly.

The third plane of cooperation is the Three Seas Initiative, which was initiated by the President of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and myself in 2015. The group comprises countries located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black seas: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary. The goal is to make joint investments in infrastructure, transport, energy, and new technologies that will boost the development in our countries and contribute to the cohesion of the European Union. When we look at the map of economic connections within the EU, we will see a significant advantage of the horizontal flows along the West-East axis over vertical flows along the North-South axis. This includes the flows of people, goods, services, and capital, but also infrastructure networks: expressways, railroads, hubs, pipelines, power and IT lines. The Three Seas Initiative, a project aimed at boosting the structural transformation of this part of Europe, is to fill in the missing elements of the "scaffold" which will help strengthen the integration of our region and the entire EU as well. The fact that aside from the capital from within the EU, also investors from the United States, China, and other parts of the world are involved in the Three Seas Initiative ensures a sound diversification of benefits and mutual interdependence.

This is the picture of today and the vision of the future of Central Europe as the community of shared activities, success, and ambitious aspirations. We have traveled a long and successful road – from being a region almost non-existent in the minds of the main actors on the world stage for a long time ("in Poland, that is to say Nowhere," as Alfred Jarry wrote in late 19<sup>th</sup> century) – to becoming a region which is one of the most dynamically developing parts of the globe and aspires to being listed in the category of centers of civilization. Central Europe – doesn't the name say it all? Feel invited to take part in this fascinating adventure.

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