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Geopolitical Journey

Part 8: Returning Home

I have come home, a word that is ambiguous for me, and more so after this trip to Romania, Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine and Poland. The experience of being back in Texas frames my memories of the journey. The architecture of the cities I visited both impressed and oppressed me. Whether Austro-Hungarian mass or Stalinist modernism, the sheer size of the buildings was overwhelming. These are lands of apartments, not of private homes on their own plots of land. In Texas, even in the cities, you have access to the sky. That gives me a sense of freedom and casualness that Central Europe denies me. For a man born in Budapest, with a mother from Bratislava and a father from Uzhgorod, I can't deny I am Central European. But I prefer my chosen home in Austin simply because nothing is ever casual for me in Central Europe. In Texas, everything is casual, even when it's about serious things. There is an ease in the intensity of Texas.

On my return, some friends arranged a small dinner with some accomplished and distinguished people to talk about my trip. I was struck by the casualness of the conversation. It was a serious discussion, even passionate at times, but it was never guarded. There was no sense that a conversation carried with it risk. I had not met some of the guests before. It didn't matter. In the region I was born in, I feel that I have to measure every word with care. There are so many bad memories that each word has to be measured as if it were gold. The simplest way to put it, I suppose, is that there are fewer risks in Texas than in Central Europe. One of the benefits of genuine power is speaking your mind, with good humor. Those on the edge of power proceed with more caution. Perhaps more than others, I feel this tension. Real Texans may laugh at this assertion, but at the end of the day, I'm far more Texan than anything else.

Or perhaps I speak too quickly. We were in the Kiev airport on the way to Warsaw. As I was passing through security, I was stopped by the question, “Friedman? Warsaw?” I admitted that and suddenly was under guard. “You have guns in your luggage.” For me, that statement constituted a near-death experience. I looked at my wife, wondering what she had done. She said casually, “Those aren’t guns. They are swords and daggers and were to be surprises for my husband.” Indeed they were. While I stood in mortal terror, she cheerily chatted up the guards, who really couldn’t make out what she was saying but were charmed nonetheless by her complete absence of fear. In my case, the fear came in layers, with each decade like another layer in an archaeological dig. For her, memory is a much simpler thing.

The region I visited is all about memories — never forgetting, never forgiving and pretending it doesn’t matter any more. Therefore, the region is in a peculiar place. On the one hand, every past grievance continues to live. On the other hand, a marvelous machine, the European Union, is hard at work, making the past irrelevant and the future bright. In a region not noted for its optimism, redemption is here and it comes from Brussels.

European Dreams

Here is the oddity. The Cold War ended about 20 years ago. The Maastricht Treaty was implemented about 17 years ago. By European — or any — standards, both the post-Cold War world and the European Union in its contemporary form are extraordinarily new inventions. People who still debate the ethnic makeup of Transylvania in 1100 are utterly convinced that the European Union represents a permanent and stable foundation for their future. The European Union will, so they say, create prosperity, instill democracy and produce a stable system of laws that will end corruption, guarantee human rights and eliminate the Russian threat.

It is almost impossible to have a rational discussion about the European Union. The paradox between memories going back millennia and tremendous confidence in an institution less than 20 years old could have been the single most startling thing I found. People whose historical sensibility ought to tell them that nothing this new can be counted on are sincerely convinced that the European Union works and will continue to work.

Another oddity was that my visit coincided with the Irish crisis. At the heart of the crisis is Germany’s recognition that the way the European Union is structured is unsustainable. The idea that countries that get help from the European Union might have a different voting status than those that give help profoundly reshapes the union from a collection of equal states to various classes of states, with Germany inevitably in the dominant position.

I noted that countries already in the European Union, like Romania and Poland, did not find this a troubling evolution. Poland might have a rational reason for this view, since it

is doing fairly well at the moment, but Romania has no reason to be confident. For the Romanians, it is as if it doesn't matter what their status is in the European Union so long as they are in the union. They see it as a benevolent entity in which the interests of some countries will put others at a disadvantage.

Even more interesting are the many Moldovans and Ukrainians who still think they are going to get into the European Union and focus on where they are in the accession process. My view is that they are exactly nowhere, because the Greek and Irish crises, plus whatever comes next, will change and probably limit who will be permitted to become a member. It is impossible for me to imagine circumstances under which either of these countries becomes a member. I can more easily imagine expulsions and resignations from both the eurozone and the European Union than I can imagine continued expansion.

In this region, in spite of the Irish crisis, almost no one drew a connection between the ongoing financial crises, doubts about the future of the European Union, questions about whether EU membership is desirable, questions about whether the rules are going to change in some unbearable way, or questions about whether the rest of Europe will want to be associated with them regardless of what they do. The EU crisis simply has not affected the perception.

I think there are two reasons for this. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the contemporary European Union coincided. For most of these countries, liberation from the Warsaw Pact coincided with the rise of the union. It and NATO were tickets out of the hell of Soviet domination. These countries have no vision of what they will be if the European Union changes. Starting a discussion of this would create a fundamental political crisis based on the question of national identity. No one wants to have that conversation. Therefore, it is better to pretend that what we see in the European Union are passing clouds rather than an existential crisis. Far better to postpone the conversation on what Romania or Poland is if the union becomes something very different than to have the conversation now. Therefore, it is declared, ex cathedra, that the European Union is not facing redefinition.

The second reason has to do with Germany. All of these countries lived through nightmares in World War II. For all of them, allied with or enemies of Germany at the time, Hitler led to national catastrophe. Germany has re-emerged as the dominant European power and EU center. If the memories rule, these countries should be panicking. They do not want to panic. Therefore, they have created for themselves a picture of a Germany whose very soul has been transformed since 1945, a Germany that has no predatory interests, poses no threats and will solve all EU problems.

There is a Germany between monster and saint that they don't want to deal with. Germany is a democratic country, and the German public is not enamored with the idea of being Europe's cash machine. The German elite have things under control for now, but if things get worse, Germany has elections like any other country. Germany does not have to be a monster in order to be unwilling to underwrite Europe — certainly not

without major political and economic concessions. The tension between the German elite and the German public is substantial, and if the German elite are broken in the political process of a democratic country, the European Union can change. Europe is democratic, and it is not clear that the European public has an unshakeable commitment to the European Union.

The Eastern Europeans are confident that this won't happen in Germany. The only exception, of course, is Turkey, which is officially eager for membership in the European Union and quite prepared to go forward without it. Turkey was the wild card on this trip, the country that didn't fit. It is therefore not surprising that Turks should have a unique view of the European Union. They are doing well economically, and while the union might have a political and cultural attraction to many Turks, it is not in any way the existential foundation of the Turkish nation. To the contrary, like Germany, Turkey is at the center of its own emerging region. This makes it difficult to think of Turkey as part of this journey, with one exception. If my idea of the Intermarium is to have an anchor, that anchor would have to be Turkey. I think Turkey needs a relationship with Europe, and the concept I have been putting forward is an alternative to the European Union.

Polish and Romanian political leaders refer to their close relationships with German leaders. They don't want to think about a wholesale cleansing of the German leadership. They may be right. It may not happen. But it is not something that can be excluded or even seen as unlikely. There is a combination of unwillingness to think of the consequences of this crisis and a sense of helplessness. Memories reverse here. Every house is filled with memories. These memories have been declared abolished by official decree. All is well.

The Question of Russia

Then there is Russia. Here there are fewer illusions, but then less time has passed. Everyone knows the Russians have returned to history. Far more than the Americans, they know that Putin is a Russian leader, in the full meaning of that term. The Ukrainians and Moldovans are divided; some would welcome the Russians, some would want to resist. The Turks, having never been occupied by the Russians but having fought many duels with them, depend on them for energy, feel uncomfortable and look for alternatives. The Romanians hope for the best with occasional combative outbursts. But the Poles have the cleverest response, actually dueling with the Russians in Belarus and Ukraine while simultaneously maintaining good relations with Moscow. I am not saying that they are effective, just that they are not passive.

But they also comfort themselves about Russia as they do about Germany. The Russian economy is weak. This is true, but it was weak when the Russians beat Napoleon and weak when they seized Central Europe. Russian military and intelligence capabilities have frequently outstripped the country's economic power. The reason is simple: Given its security apparatus, Russia can suppress public discontent more than other countries can. Therefore it can compel the public to exist with lower standards of living without resistance and divert resources to the military. With Russia, you cannot correlate

economic power and military power. Everyone has written Russia off because of its demographic problems. Russia is too complex a country to reduce its future to that. Russia tends to surprise you when you least expect it.

Of course, this is something that former members of the Warsaw Pact understand. There is genuine concern about what Russia will do in Poland and west of the Carpathians. Here, many look to NATO. Again, to me, NATO is moribund. It has insufficient military force, it has a decision-making structure that doesn't allow for rapid decisions, and it doesn't have a basing system. In addition, it has the Germans inviting the Russians into a closer relationship with NATO that everyone applauds but the Americans and Eastern Europeans. To me, NATO is no longer a defensive alliance; it is a gesture toward having a defensive alliance.

NATO is designed to come to the aid of Poland or the Baltics in the event of the unexpected and inconceivable, which would be Russia taking advantage of NATO weakness to create a new reality. For NATO to have any chance of working, it not only has to reach a unanimous agreement but it must also mobilize and move a multinational force while the Balts and Poles hold out. As in 1939, the issue is that they must remain effective fighting forces with the ability to resist and have a military capability of this generation and not the last. If the Russians are not going to attack, then there is no point in having NATO. Let it die and let the diplomats and bureaucrats go on to other careers. If there is a threat, it comes from Russia, so integrating Russia into NATO would make no sense, nor does the current NATO force structure.

A decision has to be made but it won't be. It is too comforting to think of NATO as an effective military force than to do the work needed to make it one. And when the bill is presented, it is easier to dismiss the Russian threat. Yet none of these countries will take the logical leap and simply state that NATO has no function. That's because they know better. But knowing better is not the same as going to the effort.

The problem is Germany. It is moving closer to the Russians and does not want a NATO focused on the Russians. It wants no part of a new Cold War. And no one in the countries I visited had any desire to challenge the Germans. And so the question of Russia is out there, but no one wants to state it too boldly.

The Invisible Americans

There is one country I haven't mentioned in all of this: the United States. I've remained silent on this because virtually everyone I talked to on my trip was silent about the United States. It is simply not a factor to these countries, except Turkey. I found it striking that Eastern Europe is not making calculations based on what the United States will or won't do. Perhaps the disappearance of the United States from the European equation was the most startling thing on this trip, one I didn't realize until I returned.

The European Union dominates all minds. NATO is there as well, a distant second. The Russians are taken into account. But the United States has stopped being a factor in European affairs. It does not present an alternative, and those countries that looked at it to do so, like Poland, have been bitterly disappointed in what they have seen as American promises and a failure to deliver. For other countries, like Romania, Israel offers a more interesting relationship than the United States.

The decline in American influence and power in Europe is not due to the lack of American power. It is due primarily to America's absorption in the wars in the Islamic world. To the extent the Americans interact with Europe it is all about requesting troops for Afghanistan and demanding economic policies that the Germans block.

The United States has fought two bloody and one cold and dangerous war in Europe in the past century. Each war was about the relationship among France, Germany and Russia, and the desire of the United States not to see any one of them or a coalition dominate the continent. The reason was the fear that Russian resources and Franco-German technology (particularly German) would ultimately threaten American national security. The United States intervened in World War I, invaded Northern Europe in 1944 and stood guard in Germany for 45 years to prevent this. This was the fixed strategy of the United States.

It is not clear what Washington's strategy is toward Europe at this point. I do not believe the United States has a strategy. If it did, I would argue that the strategy should consist of two parts: first, trying to prevent a Russo-German entente and, second, creating a line running from Finland to Turkey to limit and shape both countries. This is the Intermarium strategy I wrote about earlier in this series.

This strategy is not, in my mind, impossible because the countries involved are uninterested. It is impossible because Washington seems to believe that the fall of the Soviet regime changed America's fundamental strategic interest. Washington is living an illusion. It is the belief that the hundred-year war in Europe has been replaced by a hundred-year war in the Islamic world. It may have been supplemented but it has not been replaced.

In talking to people in Washington and Europe, I am made to feel anachronistic, raising issues that no longer exist. I will argue that these people are out of touch with reality. The dynamics of the last hundred years in Europe have always changed but have always returned to the same fundamental questions, just in different ways. The strategy of the Cold War cost far fewer lives than the strategies of World War I and World War II. By intervening early, war was avoided in the Cold War. It avoided a slaughter at a fraction of the cost. My countercharge to being anachronistic is that those celebrating the European Union and NATO are willfully ignoring the fundamental defects of each.

I suspect the Intermarium will come, at a time and in a way that will combine all the risks with a much higher human price. Perhaps I am wrong. I have been before. But this I am certain of: The United States is a global power, and Europe remains a critical area of

interest. I have never lived in a period when the United States was less visible, less well-regarded and less trusted than at the current moment. Democrats will blame Bush. Republicans will blame Obama. Both are responsible, but the ultimate responsibility lies with us.

Just as the Eastern Europeans are having an identity crisis, so too are the Americans. The Eastern Europeans and Turks are trying to define their place in the world after the end of the Cold War. So are the Americans. America has not disappeared because it lacks power. A country that makes up one quarter of the world's economic activity and controls the seas is hardly weak, although many would proclaim the American decline. The United States simply hasn't figured out how to handle the enormous power it has. With each succeeding president, it seems to get more confused.

Americans take the Romanian position, hoping for the best and rationalizing away their lack of exertion. I am reminded, on Dec. 7, of the price we paid for a similar indifference in 1941. At that time, the Great Depression was our excuse for inaction. Today it is the Great Recession. In the end, we had the Depression and war.

One thing that you learn in Eastern Europe is that you don't get to choose how you live. Others frequently choose for you. That is because Eastern European countries have been weak and divided. Now it is because they are trying to unite with powers in the European Union that are greater than they are. The United States, in a very different way, faces the same problem, not from weakness but from strength. Strength limits options just as weakness does.

I have come from there and am now here, a journey I have completed many times and one that always brings the singularly human pleasure of being home again. Much has changed in Eastern Europe, but, oddly, very little has. These are countries for which others define the rules. I am convinced that it doesn't have to be this way, but they are not. For them, it is the perpetual search for the other who will make rules for them. At home, I live in a country and place where resisting the rules, particularly those imposed by others, is a national obsession, but then American history has been about this sort of resistance.

I am convinced that the fate of the region I was born in and the country I grew up in are intimately linked. Neither my government nor theirs seems aware of this fact. I don't think either will understand this until history's crank turns once more, and the post-Cold War world is replaced by the next phase of history, one that will be both bleaker and more dangerous than the prosperous interregnum of the last 18 years.

