Between Resentment and Indifference
Narratives of Solidarity in the Enlarging Union

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Does anyone in this room still believe in solidarity between the “two Europes”? 

Like with previous enlargements of the European Union, solidarity features today as a crucial component of a regular rite de passage. Ideally, this rite would require a cold-hearted, impartial analysis. As an Eastern European citizen, however, I cannot promise to meet that requirement properly. Although in May I am going to celebrate the Accession as an unprecedented phase in European reunification, I am unable to disregard the intrinsic ambiguity of the feast. It will be a little gloomy, I am afraid, not only because I will miss a number of countries among the invitees but because the reunification does not rest on a consensus over the concept of solidarity between the two halves of Europe.

My presentation will revolve around rival interpretations of transnational solidarity. I will make a distinction between two dominant discourses conceived of as ideal types: an essentially romantic (“Eastern”) and an essentially pragmatic (“Western”) one, based on altruistic and utilitarian considerations respectively. The incredible bipolarity of the real types of these discourses, which is also well known from the proverbial Ossi-Wessi conflict in Germany, allows me, I believe, to commit all possible crimes against science one can commit in thirty minutes. My paper will be an orgy of oversimplification. I will use a primitive, two-actor model, in which the aggregate terms of “East” and “West” represent a large variety of agents: a great number of countries; Brussels and the EU member states; the members, the new entrants, the candidates and the “left-outs”; the elites and the people at large; governments and oppositions; politics, business and the academia, and so on, and so forth. Apologies in advance.

Under communism, solidarity was a subject of black humour rather than scholarship. An altruistic interpretation of transnational solidarity could not be accepted under the conditions of “forced solidarity”. Let me quote my favorite joke on “mutual aid” and “socialist brotherhood”: “On a military training field a Russian and a Hungarian soldier find a table of chocolate. They are terribly hungry. The Russian says solemnly: let us share it in a brotherly manner. God forbid, answers the Hungarian, we should split it up fifty-fifty.” The message was clear: if solidarity is nothing but a farce, equal sharing becomes the just alternative. In Eastern Europe one did not have to nuance that proposition until the birth of Solidarnosc, or, in transnational sense, until the fall of the Wall.

Yet, the attraction of “unforced solidarity” evaporated fast (somewhen between the first quarrels within Solidarnosc, the political disempowerment of the Eastern lands in Germany, and the outbreak of the Yugoslav war), and I returned to my customary suspicion toward the allegedly altruistic transnational relations, regardless of their origin. My personal story is irrelevant but it explains the surprise I would like to share with you today. In studying current history of ideas in Eastern Europe, I have been witnessing a renaissance of the concept of solidarity, in particular, in the context of EU enlargement. My surprise stems less from the revival itself than from the crystallization of the two rival discourses, which – unfortunately – reinforce each other, like in a dialogue of the deaf, without resulting in mutual understanding.
In running an eight country research project on cultural encounters in the economy between the East and the West, I am also astonished by the extent to which the narratives of our respondents are permeated by their views of European solidarity, no matter if they are entrepreneurs, civil servants or academics, the three target groups in our program, Easterners and Westerners alike. (We are conducting many hundreds of in-depth interviews, and preparing dozens of case studies, media- and literature reviews.) The micro-narratives allude to two macro-discourses, both dealing with the East-West distribution of costs and benefits, in the turbulent game of the Enlargement. I call them “rhetoric of resentment” and “rhetoric of indifference”. (Please guess which discourse comes from which side of the former Iron Curtain.) Although these rhetorics conflict sharply as far as their arguments and style are concerned, their representatives are fairly interchangeable, expressing similarly hybrid persuasions. I am afraid that currently it is rather difficult to determine both in the East and the West whether a given narrative of solidarity with the “Other” has been produced by a soft populist, a pragmatic conservative or socialist, or a frustrated liberal. Yet, let us venture to make a rather benevolent hypothesis. Beyond ideologies required by daily politicking, I presume finding, in the divergent narratives of solidarity, deep-seated convictions reinforced by rational motives; I mean, motives that do not aim at manipulation or self-deception.

In what follows, I will touch upon four major issues:

1. The semantic roots of the divergent approaches to solidarity
2. The difficulties of defining and measuring transnational solidarity
3. The composition of the two rhetorics of solidarity
4. The chances for a rapprochement between the two

Vocabularies. Suspecting a dialogue of the deaf, one is advised to reach for dictionaries. In looking up the word “solidarity” in English language dictionaries (Oxford, Cambridge, Webster), I found the following definitions:

1. unity or agreement, especially among individuals with a common interest;
2. mutual dependence
3. mutual support or cohesiveness within a group
4. complete or exact coincidence of interests
5. consolidation of interests and responsibilities
6. fellowship
7. community
8. combination or agreement of individuals, as of a group
9. complete unity, as of opinion, purpose, interest, feeling
10. agreement between and support for the members of a group

Apparently, in English, solidarity is not necessarily imbued with the altruistic value of fraternité and philanthropy. The emphasis is put on common interest, mutual dependence and agreement rather than support. The words “solidary” and “solidaristic” hardly exist in English, if this meaning is badly needed one may use the French original “solidaire”.

To admit my ignorance, until recently, I have replaced in English the word “solidarity” with a bunch of terms starting with “co”: companionship, cohesion, compassion, consensus. This bias comes from my mother tongue, Hungarian, or, in a wider context, from Central and Eastern European traditions as a whole. In Hungarian, for instance, one cannot be solidaristic with someone out of self-interest, not even on the basis of a sober assessment of “mutual
dependence”. Solidarity is essentially unselfish, it pertains to assisting the weaker, with a bit of sacrifice at least, a sacrifice without material reward. What you gain from supporting others is -- at most -- pure moral gratification. Also, you can't be solidaristic with the stronger or the more powerful.

When it comes to differences in meaning between Anglo-American and Hungarian terms of the same Latin/French origin, we had better consult a dictionary of German language. Small wonder that terms such as “support”, “sacrifice”, “fraternity” and “charity” (Nächstenliebe) are stressed there vehemently. In Wahrig or Duden, for instance, one comes across synonyms like „gemeinsam”, „einig” and „fest verbunden” but, at the same time, they also focus on the Solidaritätsprinzip in Catholic social teaching (the theory of Solidarismus), which expresses the „wechselseitige Füreinander-Eintretens (einer für alle, alle für einen)” and legitimizes „soziale Ausgleichsprozesse”. Furthermore, they make a sharp distinction between “Interessenssolidarität” (see, e.g., Solidarhaftung and Solidarschuldner in business law) and “Gemeinschaftssolidarität”. I expected to examine a communication gap, and actually fell in a cultural abyss.

Pains of definition and measurement. I spare you the intricacies of measuring solidarity by two parties who disagree on the merit of the concept. Even in the optimal case, in which integration is a positive-sum game, opinions will differ on whether one can call a win-win situation a quintessential embodiment of solidarity. The typical answer by a Westerner would be the following: this favorable situation results from joining forces on the basis of our common interests and shared values, therefore we are definitely solidaire with each other. Synergy is but redistribution (i.e., a sacrifice on our part) and levelling are not a primary prerequisite to solidarity.

The Easterner, however, would argue in the following way: a win-win situation can only reflect solidarity if the weaker party gains (perhaps significantly) more in relative terms than the stronger one as a result of co-operation and redistribution. Eventually, this may lead to a catching up with the West. If we, however, catch up without redistribution there is no point to talk about “genuine” solidarity. In the opposite case, if the East gains comparatively less, the Westerner will still continue to talk about solidarity whereas the Easterner will begin to wonder why the West does not offer the East part of its own gains as support in order to reduce the distance between them. Why should one regard a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor as a sign of solidarity, he/she will ask. According to his/her view, in this case it is the entrants who are, in a perverse manner, solidaire with the – stronger -- member states.

On its part, the West can choose from a large repertoire of responses, ranging from the dry message of “be happy that you do not lose” to what I would call “realistic generosity”. By the latter I mean the implementation of the elastic idea of “give the East as much as necessary to prevent it (and the enlarging EU) from declining, and as much as possible in terms of the stability of the West.

Like with all theories of distributive justice, the devil is in the details of defining what exactly is being distributed and in what manner. Is it income or wealth, or chances to generate them? Is it a material or a spiritual good? Also, one party may lose in the short run to gain in the long run. Gaining might also mean that you lose less than you would have lost if you had not taken part in the game. Are the gains really measurable by the two actors and commensurable between them? How do we calculate, for example, the decline in the sovereignty of the entrants, and how do we compare the result of our calculation with the growth of agricultural subsidies allotted to them?

Let us suppose the impossible: all short- and long-term gains and losses of the Enlargement are quantifiable. We know not only all price indices, trade figures and employment indicators but also the monetary equivalent of each and every indirect effect of economic change on air pollution, life expectancy or propensity for migration. Let us also
presume optimistically that, at the end of the day, the entrants will be net recipients of the integration in all respects of the overall give-and-take. Yet, even in this Paradise we will hear many Easterners lament: “You, Westerners are not quite solidaristic with us if you write us a billion euro cheque but deliberately drop it to force us to bow down before you.”

Rhetoric of resentment. The Westerner may find the metaphor of the cheque pathetic. Nevertheless, there already exists a detailed Leidensgeschichte of the Accession; a story that starts with the “original sin” of rejecting in 1989 the project of European reunification, and replacing it with the foggy prospect of gradual integration. In fact, membership in the EU was not conceived of by the West as a quasi-natural entitlement that a country deserves by its geographical position, or as a moral compensation for suffering under communism.

The Easterners made repeated attempts to convince the West of the fact that instant or fast integration would demand less sacrifice than a gradual solution. They referred to the danger of communist restoration, to the economic and political destabilization of the region, and, in a self-ironical tone, even to the risks of forcing the “bad children” to play in the yard. “We make a bigger noise outside than inside, under strict surveillance”, they said, “and tomorrow we will bring in more mud on our shoes than today”. “Please mind”, they went on, “that if you make us wait too long in the cold then you will have to face exhausted and angry youngsters in the new family”. No success whatsoever ...

To be sure, sharing the luck in order to help the unlucky in catching up was not only a sentimental desire by the Easterners but also a strong allusion made by quite a few politicians and prominent intellectuals in the West during the Cold War. The verbal gestures of inclusion on the basis of historical/cultural proximity did raise bold expectations in the would-be European countries. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1990s, one might still believe that the indisputably large gains acquired by the West from the first moments of post-communist transformation would pave the way for a rather smooth enfranchisement of the former Eastern Bloc by the Union. Yes, one could expect that the EU members would be solidaristic with the potential entrants at least in a narrow sense of the concept: the West would take the political and socio-cultural risks as the economic risks would be covered abundantly by profits earned by the Western investors, privatizers, advisors, etc. in the emerging markets of Eastern Europe. “We do not beg you to make favor to us, the Easterners told the Westerners, and we might also relieve you from your historical debts. But please do not forget about your most recent bills.”

It came as an embarrassment for the applicants that the principles of natural entitlement and cultural proximity was not replaced by that of co-optation based on overall reciprocity (i.e., exchanging risks without examining the performance of and making distinctions between the newcomers). Instead, the EU did not suspend the rules applied in previous enlargement rounds, and insisted on the principle of individual merits and competition among the accession candidates.

Admission in a club, athletic game, school enrollment, parental help, job interview, tourist guide, military training, etc. – even if the West has not always employed exactly these metaphors, the East translated the incoming paternalistic messages with their help, and slowly gave up every hope in symmetric relationships, fast mutual adjustment, and trust based on moral merits, traditions and an exchange of favors.

It was another blow on Eastern European self-esteem when it became clear what the EU means by “prepa-
redness to join”, what kind of performance counts, and how it is measured.

Here the tale of woe rose in epic heights and got filled with a whole series of concrete offenses ranging from the legalism of the acquis, and the changing rules of the game, through the planned postponement of the Accession date (you remember Bronislaw Geremek’s bon mot: the admission is always five years ahead of us), to the proliferation of Orientalist terms such as Eastern Enlargement, accession, etc. in Eurosppeak. “The selection procedure is distorted by ad hoc (geo)political decisions, financial constraints, etc.; “the end result was preprogrammed by a centuries-old symbolic geography, i.e., a traditional bias of the West toward East-Central Europe”; “the expected level of preparedness is higher than it was in the case of ‘Southern Enlargement’ while the support provided by the Union is much lower”; “two-speed Europe, Kerneuropa, enhanced cooperation etc. serve as linguistic means of exclusion of the Eastern periphery” – one could list the complaints without an end.

Solidarity is a fragile commodity. One has the impression that, in deciding whether or not the West shows solidarity, the East was at least as much influenced by the choreography (scenery, language, symbols, images) of the Accession as by the size of the transfer payments or the entrants’ voting rights in the enlarged Union. They felt provoked by the incessant repetition of the civilizing messages (“wait a bit and clean up your house”, “adjust to the European level”, “leave your bad habits behind”, etc.). These messages were imbued with a warning: “don’t forget please that you are the ones who want to join us”. The “take it or leave it” principle applied by the West at the end of the Accession talks (and sugarcoated only by minor concessions) was regarded by the entrants as a blackmail.

Cumulative frustrations notwithstanding, the rhetoric of resentment is more than just a sentimental or, on the contrary, a sneaky talk on historical debts and moral responsibility. The entrants are aware of the size of support the EU member states (former accession countries) have received thus far, and use these figures as benchmarks of fair treatment and dignity in the Accession talks. As we have seen, the newcomers did not refrain from comparing costs and benefits (“we give more than we take”), suggesting risk sharing (“we have made substantial payments in advance”), or calculating opportunity costs (“the Enlargement will be more expensive if you delay it”). They wish to catch up quickly, this is the cornerstone of the moral economy of the East, but do not aim at instant levelling by claiming a large part of the wealth of the member states. At the same time, they are not willing to put up with alms.

Rhetoric of indifference. By indifference I do not mean a lack of moral approach to European integration. On the contrary, the member states did not reject the ethical conclusions of the entrants’ solidarity narrative as a whole (supporting the weaker members of the “family” is, namely, part and parcel of the foundation ethos (myth) of the Union). Indifference is to reflect three things: a.) a principled uninterestedness in an overwhelmingly altruistic approach to solidarity, in historical arguments on reciprocity, and in vague ideas on distributive justice and social engineering, b.) an instinctive inattention toward any reasoning based on the concept of the victim with his/her ressentiments and toward any culture of complaint; c.) a calm and neutral stance of the “seller” vis à vis the “buyer” on the seller’s market of the Accession. To be sure, the West did not make the final objective of catching up questionable, just asked the following question: “why does the East not realize that the means it suggests, i.e., direct support serves the end of levelling wrongly?”

The Easterners waved indignantly. They did not understand why they cannot build consensus around the concept of solidarity with the Union that also loves to advertise categories such as identity, belonging, family of nations, cultural/religious traditions, citizenship, social cohesion, the European Social Model etc. With a reflex motion, the Easterners associated these categories with forgiving, biased rules, altruism, exchange of favors and generosity, applying the Solidaritätsprinzip of “one for all, all for one”. It took some time for them to recognize that the West went beyond the biblical analogy of the prodigal son: its paternalism is not a humble and unconditional one geared by affection
and bordering on self-punishment. The pater called European Union decided to be strict and demanding rather than generously tolerant. Nothing must invalidate the underlying maxim of initiation: “prove first that you are able to live with us under the same roof”.

In what follows, I will arrange the principal elements of the rhetoric of indifference according to six principal tropes of its Eastern counterpart.

1. Accession as a quasi-natural entitlement. Geography and history are only necessary but not sufficient conditions for claiming support from the West. Solidarity has not only an East-West axis but also a North-South one with far larger masses of “deserving poor”. A large part of these (e.g., people in the Mediterranean region) can also prove their geographical and cultural proximity to Western Europe. Furthermore, as the example of Turkey or Israel (or, for that matter, Russia) shows, the cultural geography of Europe is too shaky to sustain an operational theory of solidarity. The capacity of the EU for altruism is limited, says the West, and the poorer member states as well as the poorer regions or groups of citizens in the member states also compete for help. They, too, are “naturally entitled”. The larger the number of the “natural” claimants, the higher the probability of organizational overstretch.

2. Moral responsibility for Eastern Europe. This is again a fairly inoperational concept. It competes with the principle of the national and Union-level responsibility. “Until we have our nation-states”, the Westerner admits, “we will probably feel more responsible for the destiny of our lower-middle class than for that of other countries’ underclasses. Or conversely, why should eventually even the Western underclasses support the East, including its upperclasses?” In any event, what could explain a moral choice that prefers the victims of communism to those living in our own former colonies?

3. Paying historical debts. “Is there anyone out there”, he/she will continue, “who could calculate our bills from the past? What is the starting date of the period of calculation: the ousting of the Turks?; the Paris peace treaty?; Munich?; Yalta? Why not forcing the Russians to pay? Sorry, we did not colonize Eastern Europe, why should we compensate its citizens today for what they had lost under communism? True, the West was relatively lucky but who says one has to do penance for its fortune? Any way, we also contributed to welfare under communism and/or to the implosion of the Soviet empire. By the way, could you please tell us how do you treat your Eastern neighbors. Have you already payed all your historical debts?”

4. Reciprocity and risk sharing between East and West today. “In principle”, goes the argument, “this scheme of solidarity would be acceptable for us if the ‘favors’ made by the East were not overestimated while the services in return were not systematically undervalued. First, the accession countries have tremendously profited from the inflow of Western capital thus far, this was the only way in which they could avoid total collapse. Secondly, by the very inclusion in the EU, the West offers the East not only new market chances, employment possibilities and transfer payments but a bunch of positive externalities ranging from a security umbrella for investors, through growing monetary stability, business networks and education, to the brand name “Europe”. And these are just the economic advantages; advantages which could not have emerged without a bit of sacrifice on the part of the member states. The same applies to political and socio-cultural externalities: the “community achievements” being taken over by the East with much complaint harbour a large array of hard work, conflict, self-restraint, in one word, sacrifice made at earlier stages.

From this perspective, inclusion itself is tantamount to solidarity based on support and sacrifice, especially if one considers the future risks of allowing the East to use the Western societal regimes. The Accession may imply further sacrifice if the entrants abuse these regimes by tax evasion, corruption or ethnic strife, favorite topics in Western
populism. Maybe if we were able calculate the balance of costs and benefits properly, says the Westerner, it would not be the West but the East who should pay. In such a case, why should we spend for the East more than absolutely necessary for damage control?"

5. Instant/quick accession as a proof of solidarity. Reunification of Europe -- are you aware of the complexity of such a vast project, asks the Westerner. Haste may end up in a situation, in which both parties will be worse-off in the near future. Please also mind that some of the earlier EU candidates had to wait for the entry longer than you. We cannot simply renounce our whole philosophy of social engineering, which has been corroborated by the many-century long experience of making democratic capitalism work and coping with inequality in Europe."

In ideal case, this philosophy includes the following principles:

a.) An organic/evolutionary approach to institution-building, including long-term regulations, stable and formalized rules, a gradual levelling of the old and new members.
b.) Transfers alone, however large they are, do not create viable institutions. And conversely, in the lack of appropriate institutions/cultures, even the most tight-fisted support cannot be absorbed, or it will leak away due to ignorance, neglect and corruption.
c.) A preference for steady and homogeneous systems of regulation with no double standards.
d.) In order to avoid conflicts of interests, the candidates are not allowed to take part in deciding on the terms of their own admission to the Union.
e.) The organization potential for social engineering in the EU is restricted, the common tasks must be prioritized. Eastern Enlargement, for example, had to wait for the completion of the previous accession projects, and was delayed by the Deepening as well.
f.) The EU does not live in a vacuum free from the concerns of Realpolitik. No matter if we like it or not, there is a core and a periphery in European integration. Also, the Union’s political and socio-cultural goals cannot counteract the objectives of economic integration persistently. Those who happen to enter the EU during stagnation have bad luck.

6. Distributive justice and catching up. The maxims of “there is no free lunch”, “merits first, rewards later”, “no help without self-help”, etc., are familiar rules of thumb in textbook capitalism. These maxims were widely used in the Accession talks to urge the East to leave its “learned helplessness” and “subsidy addiction” behind. In so doing, the West proudly presented its stronger ego, i.e., the meritocratic (versus the charitable) one in the pedagogic exercise. Charity disguised as solidarity would demobilize the entrants and impair their abilities to catch up. Empowerment is the solution, support is a Pandora’s box.”

Chances for a rapprochement. Given the favorable bargaining position of the West, for the time being I cannot imagine but a kind of “unilateral rapprochement”, to use an oxymoron, between the two rhetorics. (In other words, this will be an adjustment by the East.) Meanwhile, provided the Enlargement will be successful, the entrants may actually reconcile themselves with a less romantic concept of solidarity. They will strive to reduce cognitive dissonance, and view the EU as a good choice. Once they enter the West, they will perhaps be confronted with less humiliation because the Enlargement will work as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the Union: “we admitted them in the club”, the Westerners will argue, “therefore they cannot be too bad”. In other words, if they are in the West they cannot be in the East any longer. Finally, the new members will be tempted by the interest-based approach suggested by the West. In fact, they have already been tempted by that. In response to the growing resentment of their Eastern neighbors, in particular, of those who have not yet been invited even to the waiting room of the Union, a familiar attitude is becoming more and more fashionable among the current entrants. I would call it “indifference”.