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Kacper Szulecki:

Smashing concrete with words.

**The Central European 'dissidents', their representations
and discourses**

About the author:

The author is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Konstanz, Germany, in the Centre of Excellence 'Cultural Foundations of Integration', 'Idioms of Social Analysis' research group (2008-11). He holds an M.Sc. in political science from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2008), and previously he was a student in international relations and sociology at the Universities of Warsaw and Oslo (2003–07). This text presents a Ph.D. dissertation concept as well as some preliminary research results.

e-mail: kacper.szulecki@uni-konstanz.de

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Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Klagenfurter Straße 3

28359 Bremen

Germany

e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de

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Abstract

The dissertation project presented here constitutes an attempt to approach the fall of Communism and the histories of Central European opposition movements in a new way. Instead of retelling, once again, the story of the popular revolutions of 1989, it focuses on a group of actors that took part in the events leading to the 'Autumn of Peoples' – the democratic 'dissidents'. However, in this study, they are treated not as specific individuals, but as representatives of what I call a 'dissident figure', the outcome of complex identity-building processes. The theoretical explanation, involving a presentation of the web of identities and representations on the frontier of 'East' and 'West', is emphasized. The project also incorporates a second perspective, shifting from looking at the 'dissidents' as *objects* of other, mostly Western agency, to seeing them as *independent agents* making use of the trans-boundary empowerment they have received by virtue of their privileged position in the eyes of the 'West'. A strategy of analysing the discourses of the dissidents is proposed, with special emphasis on the localization practices through which the 'dissidents' reconciled the constructions of a Central European identity, which entailed being part of the West yet separate from it. An empirical example of the localization of human rights and other universalizing discourses in Poland and Czechoslovakia, based on some preliminary research of mostly primary sources, is presented as an illustration.

1. Introduction

What do a Burmese monk, a Chilean writer, a Russian chess champion and an Iranian feminist have in common? Not much, it seems. And yet they are all crammed into one (supposedly descriptive) category – they are 'dissidents'. As a Czech playwright known more for his political activities once wrote:

From time to time I have a chance to speak with Western intellectuals who visit our country and decide to include a visit to a dissident in their itinerary – some out of genuine interest, or a willingness to understand and to express solidarity, others simply out of curiosity. Beside the Gothic and Baroque monuments, dissidents are apparently the only thing of interest to a tourist in this uniformly dreary environment.¹

'Dissidents' have always been the object of Western attention, and there are many reasons (not only aesthetic and voyeuristic as the quote could suggest) for why that is the case. Who are the 'dissidents', how do they come to be, and what sort of impact do they have? This paper proposes to look back at the democratic opposition movements in Central Europe in order to define the 'dissident' as an analytical rather than simply descriptive concept. Putting aside the debate about the actual role of domestic and societal forces in bringing down Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, we can easily agree that there is something fascinating about the phenomenon of dissidentism in general. While 1989 is a caesura of groundbreaking importance for Central Europeans, on the global scale it meant that prisoners of conscience from this part of the world would nearly disappear from the pages of Amnesty International bulletins. Opposition to authoritarianism and dictatorial power continues world-wide, and so does dissidentism. The latter is not only an act of civil courage characterized by the Greek term *parrhesia*, meaning the conscious act of speaking the truth to power at the risk of grave consequences.² It is, perhaps more importantly, an instance of transnational recognition in which an oppositionist from one country is

¹ Havel, Vaclav: *Open Letters. Selected prose, 1965–1990*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 261. The italics are mine – KS.

² *Parrhesia* is extensively discussed in: Foucault, Michel: *Fearless Speech*, Los Angeles/CA: Semiotext(e), 2001.

recognized for something larger and wider than he or she is, becomes a symbol of certain values and is taken for an example of a predefined social and political setup. To put it simply, 'dissident' is not a mere label, and empowerment does not boil down to the dollars transferred by human rights foundations in the West. The term has performative qualities of its own.

The dissertation project presented here is based on the assumption that the 'dissidents' constitute a socio-political phenomenon that is different from democratic opposition movements. The 'dissident' is thus seen as a rhetorical and political *figure* which is empowered through international recognition; however, it is the translation of the figure of the 'dissident' into local contexts that enables it to function internationally. The project therefore seeks to investigate the historical roots as well as the changing meanings of the concept of 'dissident' in the context of Central Europe, and look into the ways the concept itself was employed by those who were labelled as such. The example of human rights (HR) and pacifist discourse is provided as an example of how the specific position the 'dissidents' were in and their role as metaphorical 'bridges' between 'East' and 'West' were used to translate or *localize* values usually considered universal.

2. Literature on dissent in Central Europe. A critical review

Two decades after 1989, scholars in the humanities and social scientists are still struggling to understand and explain what really 'brought the Iron Curtain down'.³ International relations theorists and prominent historians generally focus on the macro-scale power politics leading to the 'end of the Cold War' and on the emergence of a new world order from the debris of the old system.⁴ The emphasis on international processes and great power politics seems to have had an impact on the general Western discourse, which emphasizes the symbolic 'fall of the Berlin Wall' rather than the 'democratic revolutions' of Central Europe (CE) or the 'Autumn of Peoples'. These studies explain the events of the late 1980s either through material or ideational factors⁵, putting more emphasis on either on Western or Soviet policies; what they share is a general tendency to dismiss the importance of societal actors such as democratic opposition movements. In a recent, and otherwise impressive, history of post-war Europe, Tony Judt is clear about that: 'Illusions and reborn hopes (...) that is all [societal actions] were. They were not in themselves a harbinger of the downfall of Communist power. [...] Communism was about power. [The mass dissent and the events in Poland] were a stirring prologue to the narrative of Communism's collapse, but they remained a sideshow. The real story was elsewhere.' He also dismisses intellectual oppositionists as 'a tiny minority of the population [who] represented only themselves [...]'. In his view, '[T]he intellectual opposition in Central Europe had little immediate impact.'⁶

³ I purposefully call up the different metaphors and expressions used to describe the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe to show how varied scholarly and political perspectives are.

⁴ E.g. Wohlforth, William C.: Realism and the End of the Cold War, in: *International Security*, 1994-5 (Vol. 19), No. 3, pp. 91-129; Brooks, Stephen G. / Wohlforth, William C.: Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War. Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas, in: *International Security*, 2000-1 (Vol. 25), No. 3, pp. 5-53; Hyde-Price, Adrian: Normative Power Europe. A Realist Critique, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2006 (Vol. 13), No. 2, pp. 217-234.

⁵ For ideational explanations of Soviet non-intervention policy see: Checkel, Jeffrey: *Ideas and International Political Change. Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War*, New Haven/CT: Yale University Press, 1997; English, Robert: *Russia and the Idea of the West. Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press, 2000.

⁶ Judt, Tony: *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 589-590, 576.

Other strands of political science (e.g. comparative politics) are interested mostly in the institutional outcomes of the 'regime shift' and thus rarely ask about its causes and history.⁷ They employ Western categories of liberal democracy as an ideal type, creating such concepts as 'transition economies' and 'post-communist nascent democracies' to explain the discrepancy between what is actually observed in CE and the ideal typical expectation. They fail, however, to problematize the notion of democracy as a general idea that is reformulated in various local (national) contexts.

Many important sociological and historical works challenge the writings mentioned above, arguing that change was often ideational and to a great extent came from below – i.e. from the domestic level of Central European societies. John L. Gaddis notices the 'shift in power from the supposedly powerful to the seemingly powerless', and clearly acknowledges the role of East and Central European societal movements: 'They were ordinary people with simple priorities who saw, seized, and sometimes stumbled into opportunities. In doing so they caused a collapse no one could stop. Their "leaders" had little choice but to follow.'⁸ This sentiment, however, still depicts the societal actors as having been driven by some exogenous opportunities. Padraic Kenney suggests that younger opposition movements in Central Europe were especially able to create opportunities for themselves, thus finding a niche for action.⁹ Studies counterbalancing the materialist and intergovernmental views of 1989 often work with the concept of the civil society,¹⁰ emphasizing the role of dissident intellectuals¹¹ and the impact of ideational factors;¹² however, they often focus solely on the events of 1989 (under the label of 'transition studies')¹³ and not their roots.

The historical trajectories of oppositional sentiments and early examples of social movements have been explored already in a plethora of studies dating back to the late 1970s,¹⁴ with special emphasis on movements such as those spearheaded by the Polish 'Solidarity' and the *Workers' Defence Committee* (KOR), or by the Czechoslovak *Charta 77*.¹⁵ Recently, a younger generation of Central European histori-

⁷ E.g. Miklaszewska, Justyna (ed.): *Democracy in Central Europe 1989–99. Comparative and Historical Perspectives*, Kraków: Meritum, 1999; Krouwel, Andre: *Measuring Presidentialism and Parliamentarism. An Application to Central and East European Countries*, in: *Acta Politica*, 2003 (Vol. 38), No. 4, pp. 333–364; Wydra, Harald: *Communism and the Emergence of Democracy*, Cambridge: CUP, 2007.

⁸ Gaddis, John Lewis: *The Cold War*, London: Penguin, 2007, p. 238.

⁹ Kenney, Padraic: *Framing, Political Opportunities, and Civic Mobilization in the Eastern European Revolutions. A Case Study of Poland's Freedom and Peace Movement*, in: *Mobilization. An International Journal*, 2001 (Vol. 6), No. 2, pp. 193–210.

¹⁰ Cohen, John L. / Arato, Andrew: *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, and earlier: Keane, John: *Democracy and Civil Society*, London: Verso, 1988. Compare: Wnuk-Lipiński, Edmund: *Vicissitudes of Ethical Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, in: *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 2007 (Vol. 20), No. 1, pp. 30–43.

¹¹ Bozóki, András (ed.): *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, Budapest: CEU Press, 1998; Friszke, Andrzej: *Przystosowanie i Opór. Studia z Dziejów PRL*, Warsaw: Więź, 2006.

¹² As HR norms in: Thomas, Daniel C.: *The Helsinki Effect. International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, Princeton/NJ: PUP, 2001; Evangelista, Matthew: *Unarmed Forces. The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

¹³ E.g. Ekiert, Grzegorz / Kubik, Jan: *Rebellious Civil Society. Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993*, Ann Arbor/MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Poland from Inside, special issue of *Survey – a Journal of East and West Studies*, 1979 (Vol. 24), No. 4; Leftwich Curry, Jane (ed.): *Dissent in Eastern Europe*, New York/NY: Praeger, 1983; Ash, Timothy Garton: *The Polish Revolution. Solidarity 1980–82*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1983; Havel, Vaclav et al.: *Power of the Powerless. Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, New York/NY: Palach Press, 1985.

¹⁵ Prečan, Vilem: *Charta 77. 1977–1989. Od Morální k Demokratické Revoluci*, Bratislava: Archa, 1990; Branach, Zbigniew: *Mit Ojców Założycieli. Agonia Komunizmu Rozpoczęła się w Gdańsku*, Bydgoszcz: Cetera, 2005; KARTA. *Słownik*

ans, making use of the new sources available, has recently been attempting to re-tell the story of the demise of Communism,¹⁶ and the key actors of these events are also sharing their reflections.¹⁷ The most striking dissonance is, however, that many of the written histories – factual accounts – of the democratic opposition movements as well as studies attempting to grasp the processes behind the democratic revolutions of 1989 fail to put forth any hypotheses about the mechanisms through which Communism was dismantled. Very interesting research seeking to fill this gap was conducted from the perspective of 'inside-outsiders', i.e. Western scholars pointing out processes and patterns less visible for academics enmeshed in their national contexts, discussing such notions as anti-politics or the blurred relationship of (counter)culture and power.¹⁸ Especially the latter project, developed by Kenney, constituted a very important and interesting attempt to bridge the factual and the process-oriented approaches with the idea of a 'carnival of revolution', while at the same time providing an alternative narrative of the history of Central European opposition in the late 1980s (which was, prior to this work, an under-researched lacuna).¹⁹ In the field of international relations, Central European human rights movements were analysed using the transnational models of normative change developed in earlier studies.²⁰ These models unfortunately downplay the role of domestic traditions and ideational contexts, and hence overlook the complexity of the 'grafting' and 'localizing' of norms.

Even though all these studies should be praised for adopting a bottom-up perspective and for their sensitivity to the role of societal actors (such as domestic opposition movements), little or no meta-reflection on the way we perceive Central European dissidents has appeared, and the idiomatic character of the concept of 'dissidents' has not yet been investigated.²¹ The notion of *civil society* in Eastern European contexts is mostly used to underline the conflict between the authoritarian state and the society. I argue that the figure of the 'dissident' and the mechanism of its construction can tell us more about the features of (and preconditions for) civil society in totalitarian/authoritarian states. This focus highlights the importance of transnational recognition and the complex interplay between the West and

Dysydentów. Czołowe Postacie Ruchów Opozycyjnych w Krajach Komunistycznych w Latach 1956–1989, Tom I, Warsaw: Karta, 2007; Friszke, Andrzej / Paczkowski, Andrzej: NiepoKORni. Rozmowy o Komitecie Obrony Robotników, Kraków: Znak, 2008.

¹⁶ Codogni, Paulina: Okrągły Stół, czyli Polski Rubikon, Warsaw: Collegium Civitas, 2009. From a more contestatory perspective: Musiał, Filip / Szarek, Jarosław: Precz z Komuna. Z Archiwum Bezpieki – Nieznane Karty PRL, Kraków: IPN, 2006.

¹⁷ Geremek, Bronisław / Żakowski, Jacek: Rok 1989, Warsaw: Agora, 2008; Wałęsa, Lech: Moja III RP. Straciłem cierpliwość!, Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2007; Michnik, Adam: Wyznania nawróconego dysydenta, Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2003; Havel, Vaclav: Tylko krótko, proszę. Rozmowa z Karelem Hvižd'alą, zapiski, dokumenty, Kraków: SIW Znak, 2007. Also, biographies were made available, e.g.: Kurski, Jarosław: Wódz. Mój przyczynek do biografii, Warsaw: BGW, 2008; Bouyeure, Cyril: Adam Michnik, biografia. Wymyślić to, co polityczne, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009.

¹⁸ Ost, David: The Defeat of Solidarity, New York/NY: CUP, 2005; Kenney, Padraic: A Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989, Princeton/NJ: PUP, 2002.

¹⁹ Compare: Skórzyński, Jan: Rewolucja Okrągłego Stołu, Warsaw: SIW Znak, 2009.

²⁰ Thomas, Daniel C.: The Helsinki Accords and Political Change in Eastern Europe (Chapter 7), in: Risse, Thomas / Ropp, Stephen C. / Sikkink, Kathryn (eds): The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change, Cambridge: CUP, 1999, pp. 205–233; Chilton, Patricia: Mechanics of Change. Social Movements, Transnational Coalitions, and the Transformation Processes in Eastern Europe, in: Risse-Kappen, Thomas (ed.): Bringing Transnational Relations back in. Non-state Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions, Cambridge: CUP, 2003, pp. 189–226.

²¹ Langenohl, Andreas: Zweimal Reflexivität in der gegenwärtigen Sozialwissenschaft. Anmerkungen zu einer nicht geführten Debatte, in: Forum. Qualitative Social Research, 2009 (Vol. 10), No. 2, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs090297>

its Eastern neighbourhood in the development of civil society structures in Central Europe, while also emphasizing the socially constructed aspects of this process.

3. Research strategy and theory. Identities, discourses and dissidents

This is where the project sets off. Theoretically, it rests on the post-structuralist theories of discourse and the role of language as an ontologically significant, constraining and constitutive structure of all political action.²² The 'dissident' is a concept developed in Western discourses on Eastern Europe and, more generally, on non-Western Others.²³ It is *performative* in the sense that the 'dissidents' are 'created' – i.e. constructed and empowered through transnational recognition.²⁴ It is *idiomatic* in the sense that it presupposes a certain implicit assumption about both the relationship between the West and Eastern Europe as well as the role 'dissidents' play in relation to their own societies (with respect to representing their societies; we can therefore treat the 'dissidents' as a part taken for the whole – a *synecdoche*)²⁵ and their rulers.

The first step is therefore a critical historical analysis tracing the formation and evolution of the concept of the 'dissident' based on the public discourse understandings and the historical uses of the term. The resulting definition of 'dissidents' sees them as a position in a web of power and meaning rather than specific individuals. 'Dissidents' are created through transnational recognition and are also empowered by it. It is therefore necessary to trace the evolution of the figure of the 'dissident' by analysing all levels on which it has operated: the domestic (official and underground), international (public and official), and exilic.

However, looking only at the formation of the 'dissident' concept would not help us understand the role it, and the people subsumed under it, played. It is therefore important to see the 'dissidents' in the context of larger processes of identity creation, in which Western Europe forged its notion of Self in relation to a certain Eastern European Other.²⁶ The material reality of the Iron Curtain reinforced the imagined division between the two, leading Westerners to construct the identity of the Eastern Other mostly in spatial terms.²⁷ The figure of the 'dissident', also symbolizing the society, suggested a split within the

²² Cf. Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, New York/NY: Vintage, 1994. Also: Foucault, Michel: *Porządek Dyskursu*, Warsaw: Słowo/Obraz/Terytoria, 2002; for a more empirical application: Hansen, Lene: *Security as Practice. Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, New York/NY: Routledge, 2006.

²³ The West itself is understood here in the political sense of the Cold War context, meaning the capitalist and more often than not democratic (however blurred the concept is) states of non-Communist Europe as well as the US and Canada.

²⁴ Searle, John: *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York/NY: Free Press, 1995.

²⁵ This logic is explained in: Szulecki, Kacper: *The Other Europe. How the West Created the Dissidents*, presented at the conference: *Intellectuals, Empire and Civilizations in 19th and 20th centuries*, Warsaw University, 22 June 2007 (to be published in 2009).

²⁶ For the historical foundations of this thesis see: Wolff, Larry: *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford/CA: SUP, 1994; as well as Neumann, Iver B.: *Uses of the Other. 'The East' in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis/MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; also Hansen, Lene: *Security as Practice. Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, New York/NY: Routledge, 2006.

²⁷ As Lene Hansen notes, identities can be created on spatial, temporal and moral grounds. In the case of the Western discourse on the Eastern European Other, I argue that that space was used in the process of differentiation (West vs. East), while the identities of East European 'dissidents' included an element of moral and ideational similarity. The demise of Communism in East-Central Europe and the fall of the imaginary spatial division involved a reformulation of the Eastern European Other in temporal terms – as 'underdeveloped' and 'on the path to stable democracy'. Compare: Fabian, Johannes: *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Other – prompting Westerners to construe the 'dissidents' as (at least potentially) sharing the values of the West and (supposedly) representing their own societies, while opposing the state socialist apparatus – a 'fifth column of Western establishments east of the Yalta line' as Vaclav Havel jokingly remarked.²⁸ This view impacted Western official policies and public opinions about the situation of Eastern European societies. It contained, however, some obvious simplifications that were difficult for Central-Eastern European oppositionist intellectuals to accept and often caused grave misunderstandings and fierce conflicts.²⁹

Discursive structures are difficult to transform, but they can be resisted and even destabilized. The discourse of 'Central Europe' constituted such an attempt to question and destabilize Western Europe's perspectives on its Eastern neighbours. Because the identity of the Eastern European Other was constructed spatially, 'Central Europe' was a means to separate the inhabitants of Soviet satellite states (and of some western Soviet republics) from the Russian East also in geographical terms. The 'dissidents' own intellectual activity influenced the social imaginaries³⁰ of Central European societies (in fact, the very notion of 'Central European societies' is an effect of the circulation and diffusion of formerly elite ideas).³¹ The next step in this project is therefore to probe official and samizdat publications for traces of these discourses. Additionally, the project embarks from these assumptions on a comparative analysis of the discourses of Polish, Czech and Slovak dissidents. What role did the idea of Central Europe play in joining the 'dissidents' from the countries in this region?³² Are the 'dissident' ideas homogeneous in content, or is it the 'structural' similarity of power relations that makes 'dissidents' comparable? These questions are explored through a discourse analysis of 'dissident' writings and a historical analysis based on secondary sources.

Bearing in mind the specific role the 'dissidents' had to play – being suspended between the West and the domestic 'Eastern' settings, taken as a symbol of the 'Western Self' within the 'Eastern Other', the project takes a closer look at the practices of localization of wider (European and universal) ideas and discourses. The 'dissidents' attempted to gradually enlarge and reinforce the public sphere of their societies, understood as the space for open debate on issues of society-wide importance.³³ The 'dissident' intellectuals of Central Europe faced very difficult ideational challenges. Feeling a part of both their 'native realms'³⁴ and the wider homeland of Europe, they were torn between perspectives on crucial values. To give an example of this logic: democracy is seen as one of the key European values. How did the 'dissidents' reconcile the divergent understanding of democracy coming from Western Europe and

²⁸ Havel, Vaclav: *Open Letters. Selected prose, 1965–1990*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 292.

²⁹ Some examples of such misunderstandings between intellectuals operating in two separate worlds are given in: Płynię się zawsze do źródeł, pod prąd, z prądem płyną śmiecie, A. Michnik's interview with Z. Herbert, in: Herbert nieznan. Rozmowy, Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2008; and famously: Miłosz, Czesław: *Zachód*, in: *Idem. Zniewolony umysł*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999.

³⁰ Taylor, Charles: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, in: *Public Culture*, 2002 (Vol. 14), No. 1, pp. 91–124; Lee, Benjamin / LiPuma, Edward: *Cultures of Circulation. The Imaginations of Modernity*, in: *Public Culture*, 2002 (Vol. 14), No. 1, pp. 191–213.

³¹ Kundera, Milan: *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, in: *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984.

³² Contacts between Central European dissidents were established by the 1970s: *Biuletyn informacyjny uczestników ROP-CiO*, 6. October 1978 [samizdat], Archiwum KARTA.

³³ Habermas, Jürgen: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

³⁴ The expression is borrowed from Czesław Miłosz and illustrates very well the problem of being an integral part of Europe, yet simultaneously struggling with one's own peripheral position. Cf. Miłosz, Czesław: *Native Realm. A Search for Self-Definition*, New York/NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

'translate' it, using pre-existing domestic traditions (such as the long-lasting yet specific democratic experience of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Czech memories of the First Republic),³⁵ into the context of state-socialist societies? By the same token, I would like to look at the way core European values were carved to resonate with the local traditions and discourses. This form of 'being European, but in our own way' – i.e. feeling like a part of Europe, but bearing some distinct 'Eastern' traces (thus countering the alleged inferiority of the Eastern European Other with a spatial counter-narrative of the 'Centre', the cultural claims to Europe and the traces of regional pride and claims to moral superiority), is also an important part of the intellectual project of 'Central Europe'.

The project seeks to analyse the discursive practices of democratic oppositionist circles in Poland at several points in time while looking for the localizing practices vis-à-vis such European values as *democracy, freedom, peace* and *environmental protection*.³⁶ The hypothesis is that even though these concepts were used in the 'East-West' dialogue, the meanings involved were often divergent. The strategies of HR adaptation and localization were creatively used throughout the 1980s by such opposition movements as the Polish *Wolność i Pokój* (WiP) or the Czechoslovak *Hnutí za Občanskou Svobodu* (HOS), and thus paved the way for the revolutions of 1989 and the democratic regimes that followed. The 'dissidents' (making use of the position they gained through the performative function of the 'dissident' as a concept) were attempting to bridge this semantic gap all along, from the establishment of wider intellectual dissent in the mid-1970s (often associated with the Helsinki Accords, and therefore the need to find a way for human rights norms to resonate domestically), through 1989 and beyond, to the proclamation of the Copenhagen Criteria, when an 'operationalization' of European values took place. Through an analysis of 'dissident' texts (declarations, statements, essays but also memoirs), I intend to uncover what strategies were used and what stories were told to localize the HR discourse and norms. In other words, I want to find out what made the discourse resonate with the local populace; did it strike a chord with their values and traditions (or at least – what was *presented* as traditions in order to resonate with human rights)? The answers to these questions can shed new light on the debate about European as well as Central European identity, and the political manifestations of socio-cultural structures in a uniting Europe.

4. An example of dissident action. Localizing human rights discourses

The previous sections have discussed a different, figurative approach to the phenomenon of dissidentism. The remainder of this article is an attempt to build on this theoretical framework and to analyse the strategies and practices of localization used by Polish and Czechoslovak oppositionists in the 1980s. The figure of the 'dissident' was creatively used in the exchange between 'East' and 'West', and human rights issues were one of the areas of dialogue.

Localization is understood as a discursive practice through which a seemingly universal discourse (related to a certain idea, norm or value) is rephrased and reconstructed in such a way so as to fit the land-

³⁵ An example of a possible secondary source is: Holy, Ladislav: *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation. National Identity and the Post-communist Social Transformation*, Cambridge: CUP, 1996.

³⁶ Environmental issues are not traditionally perceived as an important element of 'dissident' thought. That is wrong. Even in the writings of the older generation oppositionists one can encounter traces of environmentalist ideas. See: Havel, Vaclav: *Krise Identity*, in: *Idem. O lidskou identitu. Úvahy, fejetony, protesty, polemiky, prohlášení a rozhovory z let 1969–1979, 1990[1984]*, London, Praha: Rozmluvy, p. 349, noticing the ecological catastrophe of the Czech Silesia, becoming 'something between the Moon and a garbage dump' (*mezi Měsícem a smetištěm*).

scape of the local setting and make these discourses meaningful and legitimate to the given culture. These 'translated' discourses can then feed back outside and add to the universality of the general discourse, which is only possible as long as it also functions locally. In this project I intend to look at the localization of discourses such as human rights, pacifism, disarmament and environmentalism. The transnational dimension here is crucial. In the localization process, we would expect to see instances in which some internationally functioning discourse is picked up and consciously grafted on to existing domestic discourses. All this should be associated with continuous communication between the Eastern actors and their Western counterparts, in which the 'dissidents' play a metaphorical two-level game.³⁷

In order to analyse the way a discourse was localized (i.e. 'translated' to fit the local ideational and discursive landscape), we need to consider several levels. Take the issue of human rights. First of all, what is meant by human rights? Secondly, what is the relationship between human rights and domestic 'traditions' in Central Europe, and how did human rights fit into the dominant Communist ideology? Once these questions have been answered, we can discuss the practices of localization and the way previously existing ideational structures were employed by the 'dissidents'. As the scope of this article does not allow for the development of a full argument, I will only provide a brief sketch of the way localization should be understood.

Some basic ideas of democracy and civic freedom were simply 'natural' in Central Europe, even under state socialism. Self-rule, the right and need to hold authorities accountable, freedom to express one's opinion on cultural, social as well as political issues – all of these elements constitute a rather basic portfolio of fundamental rights and norms according to which a society can function. These can be rightfully traced back to the organizational forms in which the political culture and nationalist self-conception of most Central European nations were shaped.

Halina Bortnowska, a Polish HR activist in the 1980s, differentiates between two basic understandings of human rights. One touches upon human-to-human relations. It is derived from the vision of humanity as an indivisible whole, and from love and respect for the Other. The second understanding, in the spirit of the Helsinki Accords, is concerned with the relation between the individual and power – especially the state apparatus. The national constitution is seen as a foundation of HR protection, and it is largely the daunting responsibility of lawyers and courts to enforce the law and monitor the state's actions with respect to the constitution. As many studies fail to note, in state socialist societies the problem was not that human rights were unknown or a novelty. It was that the constitutional declarations pertaining to human rights were not respected by the authorities.³⁸ And so, the 'problem of human rights in state socialist societies' was due to state tyranny and the suppression of individual freedom, despite the existing laws that *de jure* should (and as was proven – could) have been used to protect the people.

I argue that the conscious process of HR discourse localization, especially in the case of Poland, was predominantly an attempt to reconcile the two meanings of human rights presented above so that their formulations would reflect both the local traditions and the external understanding of human rights. In Poland the first understanding had to above all resonate with the vision of humanism rooted in the

³⁷ I borrow the two-level game metaphor from Robert Putnam, even though the original formulation dealt with intergovernmental negotiations. Compare: Putnam, Robert: *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics. The Logic of Two-Level Games*, in: *International Organization*, 1988 (Vol. 42), Summer, pp. 427–460.

³⁸ Compare: *Archiwum Komitetu Helsińskiego w Polsce*, 1984, No. 1, [samizdat], *Archiwum KARTA*.

teachings of the Catholic Church. Bortnowska explains 'Solidarity's' strategy of 'translating' human rights into the language of Christian thought:

Taking part in common action we can chose certain accents, which someone finds especially important. We simply notice how important community is for people. Christianity stresses this aspect; that is why this question is raised more often, while in the pan-humanist perspective there is more emphasis on the rights of the individual. But one does not contradict the other, as for a community to exist, the rights of the individual need to be protected.³⁹

The Helsinki Accords definitely played an important role in empowering the HR-based opposition in Central Europe in the mid-1970s. They also made the figure of the 'dissident' conceivable. Jiří Hájek, the Charter 77 spokesman, notes that the whole perspective changes

the moment that a regime which imposes on society and its citizens its narrow and restrictive, even repressive, interpretation of democracy, rights and freedoms, proclaims or indicates elsewhere, and in other circumstances, its readiness to accept, or at least tolerate, other interpretations.⁴⁰

After the passage of the Accords, the democratic opposition in Central Europe was able to transcend the borders of their states and 'their' bloc. The Human Rights accords provided a common platform for dialogue, upon which definitions of what was at stake had to be made compatible. 'Dissidentism', in the figurative sense I propose here, was only possible once such a platform was in place. Prior to that, opposition to Communism in Central Europe was understood on a different transnational 'platform' – Marxist ideology. Those who opposed the Party's political line were then either 'anti-Communists' (remaining outside the ideological sphere of the Party) or 'reformists' (heretical insiders). The original meaning of the term 'dissident' (from the medieval Latin word for heretic or renegade) refers to the latter. The HR discourse defined by the West stripped the term 'dissident' of the remaining traces of that original meaning and widened it to encompass all those who advocate for a 'common' understanding and practice of human rights (later to be transposed to other values recognized by the West).

At that point the 'dissidents' gained their crucial role of mediating between the West and the domestic context. On the one hand, they were able to use the international discourse of human rights to criticize their governments, in the manner Hájek describes:

The fact that the regime reacts to criticism of its failure to implement laws and international pledges by persecuting or discriminating against its domestic critics, and it refuses to discuss the implementation of these pledges with its co-signatories, proves that it does not have a clear conscience. When this is done by the regime describing itself as socialist it is a disservice, to say the least, to the cause of socialism, its democratic and humanizing mission and, thus, to social progress itself.⁴¹

They could thus both hold them accountable for their 'pledges', the dead letter of the domestic law and the even more visibly dead ideals of the preached socialism. That is a strategy that was used by most opposition groups from 1975 on and well into the 1980s. The role of the 'dissidents' as mediators was to take an internationally recognized issue, put it on the domestic agenda using both the existing traditions and laws, as well as international obligations, and then to feed the description of their struggles back to

³⁹ Potrzebna jest asymetria, E. Zbiegieni's interview with Halina Bortnowska, in: *Znak*, 2008 (Vol. 643), December, pp. 43–52, here p. 46.

⁴⁰ Hájek, Jiří: *The human rights movement and social progress*, in: Havel, Vaclav et al.: *Power of the Powerless. Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, London: Hutchinson, 1985, p. 135.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

the international community in such a way that the trans-boundary saliency of the issue would be immediately recognized. That strategy was mastered by young opposition movements such as the Polish *Wolność i Pokój*, which chose specific issues, for example 'defending the pacifists refusing military service or environmental problems, [which] caused a lot of trouble for the communist regime, because, as a rule, the demands of the protesters were fully in line with the assurances and declarations of the authorities.'⁴² The definition of 'peace' and 'pacifism' adopted by WiP makes these issues an extension of the HR discourse as 'the main condition of peace occurring in the political life of states and nations is the effective guaranteeing of personal freedom to all the people.'⁴³

As noted, 'dissidents' were attempting to make their struggles understandable and digestible for the West. This did not happen automatically, as Bortnowska recalls:

In the beginning of the Solidarity movement the most important issue was to find some foundations, the possibility to call upon the laws seen as binding within the international community, to something that would persuade others to take our side.⁴⁴

Human rights, pacifism, environmentalism, women's issues, and even gay and lesbian rights⁴⁵ were all used by the oppositionists not only because they mattered. They were a tool for destabilizing the system, and their use was often clearly strategic, or at least motivated by circumstances.⁴⁶ A WiP activist, Jan Żurko, admits that pacifism was chosen as an issue not because of actual convictions (although the activists gradually embraced the issue once they began to fight for it), but because 'pacifist ideas have, contrary to the common opinion, a lot of potential. Especially among the youth, but not only the youth. [...] Even though the Polish society is, seemingly, not very pacifistic.'⁴⁷ The last quote clearly points to the need for reformulations that made the 'universal' become locally acceptable, by both the society and the various centres of authority ('Even the fact that our ideas were accepted by the Church hierarchy we took as a very positive value').⁴⁸ The meaning of the discourse at home and its international representation very often diverged,⁴⁹ something that comes as no surprise judging by the way this 'translation' of ideas proceeded.

As this brief empirical illustration suggests, there is still much to be discovered about the nature and role of the Central European oppositionists. The main point is not to remain focused only on Solidarity and Charter 77, not only on 1975 and 1989, but to explore the 'spectre' of 'dissentism' as it was 'haunting

⁴² Kenney, Padraic: *Wrocławskie zadymy*, Wrocław: ATUT, 2007, p. 115.

⁴³ Deklaracja założycielska Ruchu 'Wolność i Pokój' §2., <http://www.tezeusz.pl/cms/tz/index.php?id=1856>, accessed 29 May 2009.

⁴⁴ Potrzebna jest asymetria, E. Zbiegieni's interview with Halina Bortnowska, in: *Znak*, 2008 (Vol. 643), December, pp. 43–52.

⁴⁵ Feminist and emancipatory ideas are present in: Uhl, Petr et al.: *Program společenské samosprávy*, Cologne: Index, 1982. For first discussions of LGBT issues see: A-Capella, 1989, No. 16 [samizdat], *Archiwum KARTA*.

⁴⁶ Compare: Kenney, Padraic: *A Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989*, Princeton/NJ: PUP, 2002, p. 61. Sometimes inspired by the popularity of an issue in the West, as in the case of environmentalism according to Leszek Budrewicz, in: Kenney, Padraic: *Wrocławskie zadymy*, Wrocław: ATUT, 2007, p. 122.

⁴⁷ Interview with Jan Żurko in: Kenney, Padraic: *Wrocławskie zadymy*, Wrocław: ATUT, 2007, p. 141. On the intrinsic militarism of Polish patriotism: Bota, Adam: *Trzeci ruch okrężny*, in: A-Capella, 1989, No. 16, p. 12 [samizdat].

⁴⁸ Interview with Jan Żurko in: Kenney, Padraic: *Wrocławskie zadymy*, Wrocław: ATUT, 2007, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Again, peace is a good illustration. Havel's famous letter to the Amsterdam Peace Conference: Havel, Vaclav: *Anatomy of Reticence*, in: *Idem*. *Open Letters. Selected prose, 1965–1990*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991; also Rokita, Jan Maria: *Wolność i Pokój, czyli jak zwiększyć szanse pokoju w Europie*, in: *Czas Przyszły*, 1987, December [samizdat], *Archiwum KARTA*.

Eastern Europe' in the words of the Czech playwright quoted at the beginning.⁵⁰ This spectre, although by nature difficult to grasp, is what this project seeks to reveal.

⁵⁰ Havel, Vaclav: Power of the Powerless, in: Havel, Vaclav et al.: Power of the Powerless. Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe, London: Hutchinson, 1985.