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Is there a Post-Socialist Model of National Park in Central Europe ?¹

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A rather widespread representation has to be fought in western opinion: Central Europe, understood here as the German-Danubian area between the Baltic Sea and the Hungarian Great Plain, and mostly located in the Socialist camp during the second half of the 20th Century, was neither a distant far East, nor an environmental desert during this whole period of time. Contrasting with the idea of the Socialism as a lagging-behind area in the field of Nature protection, National Parks have been created there during the very same period as in Western Europe, or even before Western Europe in some cases.

This paper intends first to demonstrate the significant legacy of nature protection in Central Europe, and then would like to investigate the specificities of National Parks during the Socialist era, wondering whether a specific political regime produced specific forms of protected areas. Finally, the Socialist legacy will be questioned in its role on current nature protection policy: is there a sort of “path dependency” (Stark, Bruszt, 1998) for public policies concerning the environmental field in Central Europe, with common features between neighbouring countries?

An old nature protection policy in Central Europe

Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria were the first Central and Eastern European countries to implement a National Park policy during the inter-wars period (*see figure 1*), and other Central European areas had established at least nature reserves during the same period.

Sweden (Sarek and others) : 1909	Iceland (Thingvellir) : 1928
Switzerland (Engadine) : 1914	Netherlands (Veluwezoom) : 1930
Spain (Monte Perdido) : 1918	Poland (Bialowieza, Pieniny) : 1932
Latvia (Sliteres) : 1921	Ireland (Killarney) : 1932
Italy (Gran Paradiso) : 1922	Slovakia (Pieniny) : 1933
Slovenia (Triglav) : 1924	Bulgaria (Vitocha) : 1934

Figure 1. the twelve Countries that have first implemented a National Park Policy in Europe.

Source: WDPA 2006.

In Poland, for instance, the first attempts to create a National Park in the Pieniny mountain range date back from 1921, owed to Professor Władysław Szafer, who was then head of the National Commission for the Preservation of Nature (*Państwowa Komisja Ochrony Przyrody*), created in 1919. A small private protected area (7.5 ha) existed on the very same area, created by Earl Drohojowski around the ruins of an old castle. Polish government launched in 1928 land purchases, while Szafer published in 1929 an essay on “National parks in Poland” to fasten the process. On May, 23rd of 1932 the Ministry of Agriculture created a “National Park in the Pieniny”, on an area of about 7 sq. km (7.36 km²).

The history sounds very much alike for the Bialowieza National Park, which was first established in 1921 as a Forest Reserve, based on an ancient Royal Forest property, and turned into a national park by the 1932 Act.

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In the neighbouring Czechoslovakia, a mirror of the Polish Pieniny National Park was created in 1933 on the other side of the Pieniny, in order to create an “international landscape park” and to secure the borders, after the common agreement of the Krakow treaty on the same year. Though the purpose of this protected area was less nature protection than border protection, it has been the first opportunity for local researchers to gain some audience and to obtain a first protected area in the country.

A close connexion to western Europe

At this time, the first movements dealing with nature protection in Central Europe were quite significantly connected with western Europe. The training of the elite in Environmental protection, in botany, geology and forestry, had often been completed in western Europe. Those connexions, dating back from the pre-socialist era, lasted also after the socialism outbreak.

For instance, Władysław Szafer (1886-1970, Poland), paleobotanist, geologist and university Professor in Krakow, had studied in Vienna, at the very same time when Hugo Conwentz (1855-1922), botanist himself, raised a concern for Nature Protection in Europe at the Congress of Paris (1909) and established the very first public institution dedicated to Nature protection in the German speaking area (*Staatliche Stelle für Naturdenkmalpflege*, 1906-1910). The last works of Conwentz about “Nature Protection” (1911) and the efficient action of other German botanists such as Wilhelm Wetekamp (1859-1945) or Alfred Jentzsch (1850-1925) could not make this new interest for Nature Protection in the German speaking area the sole idea of some isolated scientists, but a real powerful concern.

As another example, Károly Kaán (1867-1940, Hungary), a well-known Hungarian agronomist and forester, academician researcher and Secretary of State for Economy, was also such a “transmitting” scientist. He studied forestry in Karlsruhe (Germany) and travelled a lot in Europe. He was responsible for the reforestation of the Hungarian Great Plain after the first World War, but was also very sensitive to Nature monuments and Nature protection. He published in 1931 a book whose title was very close from Conwentz’ one: “Nature Protection and Natural Monuments” (*Természetvédelem és a természeti emlékek*). Though he did not directly claim for the creation of National Parks in Hungary, he initiated the 1935 law for Nature Reserves and launched the National Council for Nature Protection in 1938 (*Országos természetvédelmi tanács*), which is still in charge of the Protected Area Policy of Hungary today. He made possible the establishment of two nature reserves in 1934-35, which were used as a basis for the future Kiskunság national Park (est. 1962).

Therefore, the process of creation of National Parks in Central Europe is very much alike what one could see in other European countries, since there is a common background for Nature protection in Europe that was built at the beginning of the 20th Century among scientific, political and cultural elites. One can summarize as follows the general “ingredients” for the implementation of the first National Parks (*see figure 2*).

National parks in the context of the Socialist Era

The systemic change of 1948 towards socialism did not erase the existing situation, so that it appears to be very difficult to speak of a single Socialist model of National parks. There is not one single path in the former so called “Eastern Block”: in fact, there was no “block” at all, but it existed a strong diversity of national policies, even under the socialist rule.

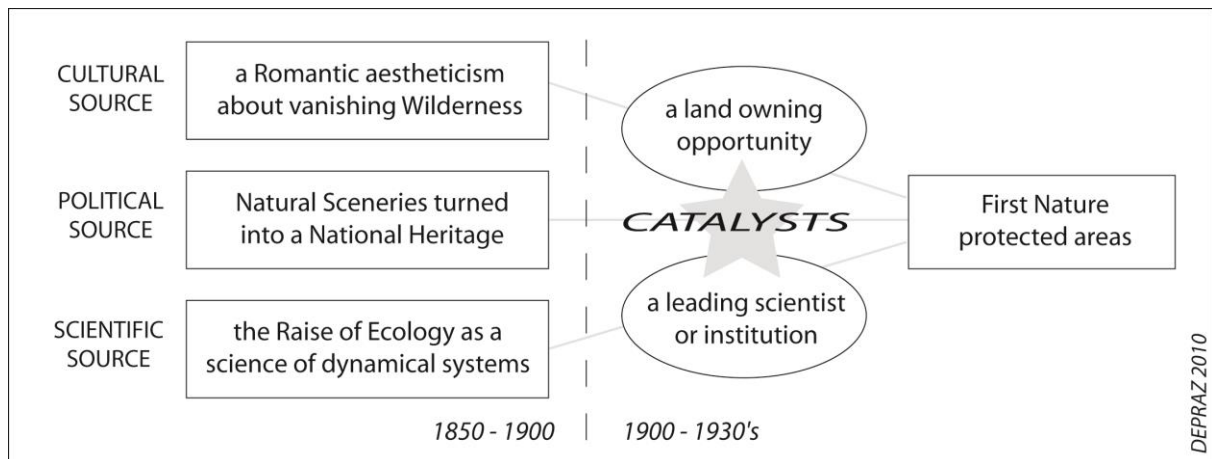


Figure 2 : theoretic approach of the sources and processes of the creation of the first National Parks in Europe.
Source: adapted from Depraz, 2008.

The environment was indeed not a central priority of the socialist regime and each country could therefore enjoy a significant level of self-decision, in so far as it would not hinder the political and economical priorities decided by the central party. Therefore the Socialist power has not stopped the pre-existing structures of Nature protection; in contrary, it sometimes promoted them, mostly in the 60's, since they were even part of the ideology on a healthy nature and a controlled development.

Moreover, the Socialist Regime showed an official interest for landscape ecology and natural sciences: in USSR, Lenin himself was rather keen to the Academies of Sciences in the Eastern Block, which were considered as an element of the soft power of the East (Batou, 1992).

However, reality was often less positive than discourses on Nature protection. In Poland, for instance, existed in 1990 thirteen National Parks already, with a rather strong level of protection – most of them falling into the II category of the IUCN. But they were covering altogether only 0.5% of the national territory. People were also convinced by propaganda that Nature in the Socialist camp was better protected than in the capitalist countries, since the latter could nothing but ruin their natural assets by their frantic search of profit (Plit, 1991). Only acid rains in Silesia were broadly known, but they were described as a legacy of the German industrialisation of the pre-war era. Thus the voice of Szafer, though respected, was considered as exaggerated by far.

Czechoslovakia created one new national park in 1949, in the Tatras chain range, as a symbol for the picturesque and highest symbolic value of this area in the country (2655m). It waited however until 1963 to establish the next one in the Giant Mountains (*Krkonoše*), highest point of the Czech part of the country. This “timing” had to deal with the raising influence of the country in nature protection, with a general law on nature protection in 1956, the IUCN membership of the country in 1958, the creation of an Institute for nature protection (*Český ústav ochrany přírody*, now agency for nature and landscape protection) on the same year and, finally, the accession of the botanist Jan Čerovsky (1930-), leader of nature protection in the country, at the position of chairman of the IUCN educational board in the 60's (he also became vice-president of the IUCN in 1991). National parks were also quite small, and rather strongly protected (cat. II after the IUCN classification).

Hungary waited longer, since this country established its first two national parks in the 70's (Hortobágy, 1972; Kiskunság, 1973), after the Stockholm summit. Surprisingly enough, both protected areas are really big (about 620 km² each!), though located in the heart of the very agricultural Hungarian Great Plain. But they appear to be a clear compromise between the needs of collective farms and nature protection, as they were constituted on a basis of many scattered small nature samples: between 9 and 21 units each (*see figure 3*) – which is sharply contrasting with the obligation of continuity that can be found in many others countries for National Parks. This network of open-air biological laboratories are perfectly matching with the soil fertility map, avoiding any loessic area, and covering every salted terrace or ecologically significant wetland of the Danube and the Tisza riverbanks. Many border effects, and a strong interaction with human activity make them fall into the V category of the IUCN. They were mostly dedicated to scientific research, with very few touristic features – but had an educational value for local people and pupils. Last but not least, Hungary included those two National Parks into their *Man and Biosphere* application (1972), so that both of them are Biosphere reserves of the UNESCO at the same time, with nature *and* culture preservation goals at the same time. It is thus a rather mild – or even weak – form of nature protection, compared with the former countries.

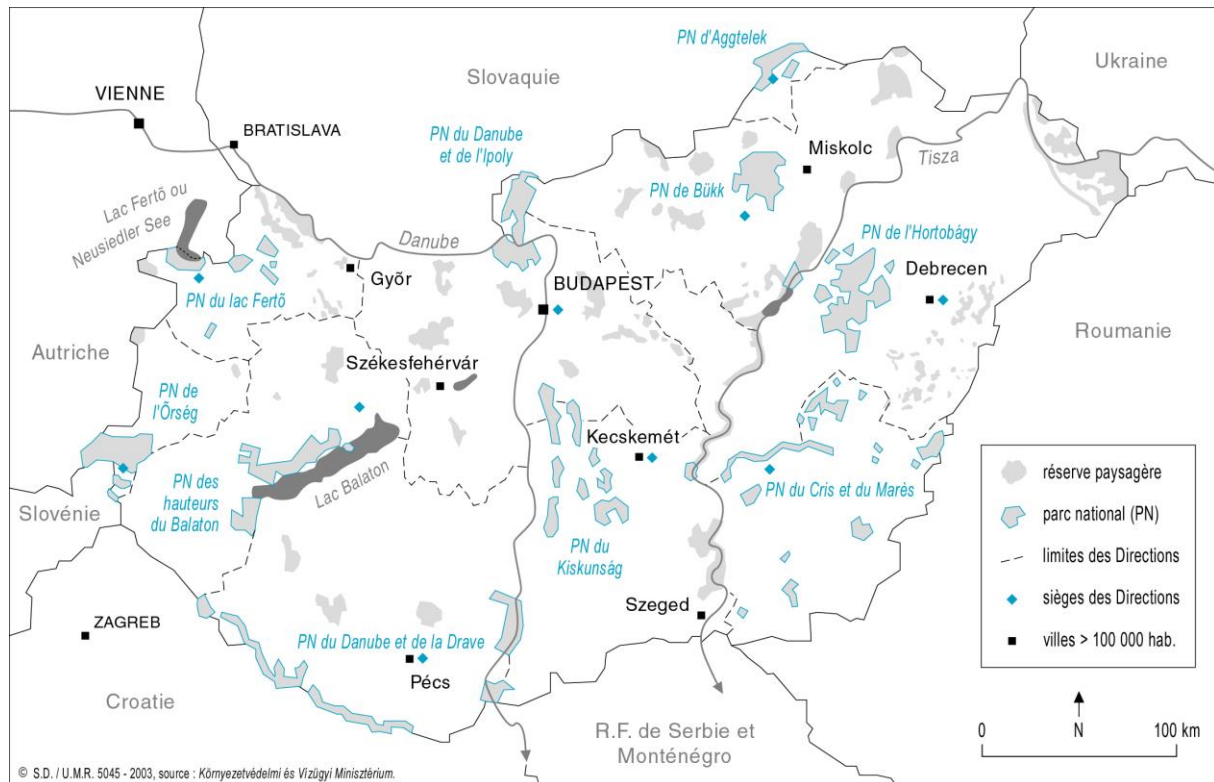


Figure 3. The scattered network of National Parks and Protected areas in Hungary – Source: Depraz, 2003.

As for the former German Democratic Republic, no National Park was ever created before the reunification, in 1990, despite several claims of civil society in the 50's and the 60's for the creation of national parks in the Saxony Mountains and the Harz. This regional exception is lacking a good explanation, but several factors could explain the situation: a fear of any “national” and centralistic structure after the Nazi period; the disinterest of the Soviet nomenclatura for Nature Protection, since the local elite was using former nature reserves as game areas; a stronger political priority for industrial development, without any charismatic

leader for nature protection (Schurig, 1991). Another explanation could lay in the rather strong density of rural areas in Germany, so that very few areas could fit with the idea of a pristine nature that had to be protected, as it was the case in the American Parks. The concept of wilderness (*Wildnis*) was rather a theoretical approach of Nature, and German conservationists, at the end of the 19th Century, rather fought for the preservation of a cultural landscape (*Kulturlandschaft*) – that is a landscape with mixed cultural and natural features that had to be held together, and that shaped with time a harmonious state of equilibrium.

So, as one can easily see, neither a unified policy, nor a common representation of Nature existed in the former Socialist block in the domain of protected areas.

Beyond specificities, a current convergence in Nature protection.

The systemic change of 1989 had a deep effect on national environmental policies. First of all, people in the Eastern block, since the beginning of the 80's, were claiming for more environmental transparency through a strong social unrest. They discovered after the fall of the iron curtain the lacks of the former socialist environmental management and endorsed their new governments with the responsibility of a new, more efficient environmental policy. On the other hand, the European Union asked Central European candidate countries to enforce in their legislation the environmental requirements of the “Acquis communautaire”, with, for instance, new laws and planning programmes for nature protection (e.g. the *National environmental Programme 1996-2002* in Hungary, for instance).

This process of post-socialist transformation, pushed by an endogenous will and pulled by the europeanization process, ended up in a “catching up” period where many nature protection structures have been reinforced or newly created, among which many new national parks, considered as the visible witnesses of the political change (*see figure 4*).

	National Parks in 1989			National Parks in 2007			General law in force on Nature protection
	Nb	area (km ²)	share	Nb	area (km ²)	share	
Germany	4	621,5*	0,17%	14	1 866,0*	0,52%	1976, revised 1998 and 2002
<i>Among which New Länder</i>	0	0,0	0%	7	808,2*	0,74%	
Hungary	4	1 413	1,52%	10	4 857,6	5,22%	1997
Slovakia	5	1 931	3,93%	9	3 178,9	6,48%	2002
Poland	13	1 819	0,58%	23	3 082,3	0,99%	1991
Czech Republic	1	363	0,46%	4	1 195,5	1,52%	1992

Figure 4. Creation of national Parks and legislative evolution about Nature protection after 1989 in Central European countries – Source: national ministries, 2009.

Germany, for instance, launched in 1990 for the New Länder of the East an ambitious “National Park Programme”, including the creation of 5 national parks, 3 nature parks and 6 biosphere reserves. Twelve major protected areas have followed since that period, rising the level of territorial protection up to 10% of the regional territory. Hungary also increased its coverage with national parks and others protected areas up to 10% of the national territory.

However, the purposes and the management of those new National Parks has somewhat changed. It is now question to link nature protection management with rural development policies, with local participation so as to ensure a good economic integration of protected

areas in their social context. There is no objective of a pure, untouched nature any more – as it could be the case in the heart of some national parks of the 70's in Bavaria or in the Hungarian Great Plain – but a slowly evolving nature “towards an optimal level of biodiversity”, after the words of the German scientist Michael Succow (Europarc Deutschland, 2000), including sustainable rural activities and economic cooperation with local representatives. Hungarian new national parks are even meant to foster some local identity and regional marketing, for instance around the Balaton lake or the Danube bend. The Directions of National Parks are even taking part into some rural development projects under the 2007-2013 programming of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). As for the Czech Republic, the peripheral position of its national parks allow several transboundaries cooperations, not only for scientific and ecologic purposes, but also for tourism management and local development.

Conclusion

Therefore there is neither a real “socialist” model of a national park, nor a “post-socialist” one, but rather a sum of very different national policies that converge today in a global European framework that has been built within the European Union.

Every Central European country is evolving towards an integrated policy, where new national parks have quickly been created since 1990 in a “catching up” strategy, but with a much broader range of functions than before: not only ecological ones, but also economic and social ones in the idea of gaining a better social acceptance and applying the principles of a sustainable development of Central European rural areas.

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