The year 1991 saw a rush of events: the Moscow coup attempt on August 19 led by Communist ideologues bent on preventing the signature of the new Union Treaty; the over-hasty dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the year under the pressure of Ukrainian secession and the determination of the Russian President to dethrone the Soviet President; the continued violent attempts by the Serbian-led Yugoslav federal army to prevent the independence of individual republics, particularly Croatia. All these were incalculable and highly significant symptoms of the eternal conflict between centralism and devolution of power, between federalism and confederalism. Such conflict is present in every society, though often in latent form. It has its origin in the individual human being, who strives towards freedom as a condition of his self-realization. He has to assume the responsibility associated with freedom, but at the same time he feels the need for a higher authority which will take the important decisions for him and discharge him of his responsibility.

Freedom and Authority

In the best of all possible human societies the twin principles of freedom and authority are to a large extent balanced as a result of consensus. Their relationship is continually re-examined and adjusted to changed circumstances. Each principle sets certain limits on the other, since both absolute freedom and absolute authority lead inevitably to malaise in human society. Absolute freedom is anarchy; it ends either in the rule of the strongest or leads to the disintegration of society. Absolute authority is dictatorship, which causes the degradation of the people and represents a dangerous obstacle to social development.

It is clear from this that democracy is by no means the opposite of anarchy or of dictatorship but occupies a median position between these two extremes of human society—a position in which arbitrary rule is prevented. In this median position freedom is not unlimited, and authority is kept within bounds.
Freedom means the power to make one's own moral decisions, and in a democratic society it implies the right to cooperate with others at the price of taking some share in responsibility, rights always being matched by obligations. In a democratic society the power of decision-making is vested in the government on behalf of the people, and it is limited by a constitution which has been approved by the people, either directly or indirectly, at some time in the recent past.

The relationship between freedom and authority depends both on unchanging factors such as the history and the geography of a country and on changing factors such as the level of economic development of a people. There are also a number of technical constraints. Quite apart from the level of education which has risen so rapidly in the industrial countries, a whole range of new technical constraints has arisen in recent years, and these have not been sufficiently taken into consideration in government policy-making. And, as we shall see, this is true not only in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the former Soviet Union the acute conflict which had been taking place has resulted in devolution of power. In Yugoslavia the civil war is for the moment working out in favor of the centralist tendencies of the Serbs. In both cases nationalist forces of remarkable strength are present on the scene. Such forces also threaten Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, while even tiny Lithuania is having difficulties with the Polish minority living on its territory.

This phenomenon is certainly very largely due to the earlier totalitarian dictatorship, which had been based on centralist principles. It may therefore be thought surprising that even in democratic Western Europe minorities are increasingly demanding autonomy. Evidence of this is seen in the growing nationalism of the Basques, the Catalans, the Corsicans, the people of the Swiss Jura, the people of southern Tirol, the Flemish, the Bretons, the Welsh and the Scots.

An Era of Change

Conditions in Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand and Western Europe on the other are entirely different. At first view this would indicate that such symptoms ought to be appreciated quite differently. Nationalism in the east of our continent is a reaction against centralist dictatorship. Could it be that nationalism in the western half constitutes a reaction against the present process of European integration?

In order to define the real problem here we must also consider the level of economic development of the peoples concerned and the nature of the technical constraints upon them. Both these elements are greatly affected by the increasing stimulus of scientific research and technical de-