

FROM ALTERITY TO IDENTITY

A CENTRAL EUROPEAN VIEW OF EUROPE AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT – In general, communities usually construct their own identity by imagining themselves in opposition to a significant ‘Other’. The notion that Central Europe was part of Europe became a discourse for the intellectuals living in this region especially during the 1980s, when the dominant Other that mirrored the Central European identity was the Russian/Soviet East. On the other hand, Central Europe’s relation to Europe (understood as Western Europe) gradually changed in terms of perception. This article describes the evolution in the perception of Europe in the Central European identity-building process. The manner in which Central Europeans related to Europe varied throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. During the 1980s, (Western) Europe was seen as a distinct Other that gradually shifted towards a similar Other, and the works of dissident intellectuals offer a meaningful insight into this transformation. The 1990s saw the Central European states define themselves as part of Europe: this is obvious in the written press as well as the official political discourse of the region. This gradual process is most noticeable in the terminology used by Central Europeans in order to define their own region: from Eastern Europe to Central Europe as a preamble for a final ‘return to Europe’.

1. György Konrád, “Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive?,” in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Currents* 5 (1986), 112.

In 1986, György Konrád wrote that the “road to Europe and a wider world beyond leads by way of Central Europe”.¹ The positioning of this region in Europe went through several processes of self-definition in the last decades of the twentieth century, every time conditioned by the geopolitical circum-

stances of the moment. Nowadays, there is a vast literature concerning the debate on the idea of Central Europe, as a region and as a concept in literature, history, culture, and so on. The rediscovery of the particular character of Central Europe within the dissident environments from the Communist countries (especially in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland) after the 1975 Helsinki Agreement underlined not just a cultural differentiation from the rest of the Socialist Eastern European bloc, but also a peaceful discourse of challenging the postwar geopolitical division of Europe.

This article focuses on how Central Europe has defined itself as a region and a culture in relation to Europe before and after the fall of the Communist regimes established after the Second World War. In order to analyse this shift, I will first present how Central Europe as a spatial and cultural construct was created in relation to Europe at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s by the dissident intellectuals from the Communist states of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, and then proceed with a discussion of how this representation was adapted to the new geopolitical situation that followed the fall of the Communist regimes. My analysis will start from the intellectual discourse formulated before 1989, a milieu in which 'Central Europe' re-emerged as a concept and as a cultural, historical, and even political region of Europe, and will continue by also examining the political discourse at the beginning of the 1990s to see how this region changed its representation and its alterity to Europe in order to attain the national interests of its individual states.

Either as a geographical region or as a philosophical idea, Central Europe was imagined almost without exception in opposition to an Other, real or imagined. Before 1989, Central Europe was constructed in opposition to the Russian/Soviet East as a way to challenge Soviet domination over the East-Central part of Europe, but also in a way that made it different from Western Europe. After the events of 1989, when the Soviet Union no longer represented such a threat to the new democratic states, the 'return to

Europe' meant creating other forms of alterity to highlight Central Europe's similarity to Western Europe: a European discourse emerged that gradually transformed alterity into identification.² The article will deal with the narrow understanding of Central Europe, which comprises Czechoslovakia (after 1993, Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland. As far as the term *Europe* is concerned, to Central Europeans this actually refers to Western Europe, as this is an important reference point for their political aspirations and cultural values.

This image of Central Europe, defined in relation to its neighbours, was created by intellectuals during the final decades of the twentieth century, mostly as a cultural concept with the possibility of acquiring a political dimension. The manner in which the region defined itself in connection to (Western) Europe has followed an indirect long-term trajectory, first of contesting the Communist regimes, then of acceding to the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The main goal was to intellectually and geopolitically move the region closer to the West and further from the East, constantly reconceptualising its meaning and using its specificity in order for it to be accepted as fully and equally European, both in political and cultural terms.

FROM ALTERITY TO IDENTITY: CENTRAL EUROPE'S VIEW OF EUROPE IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

After 1945, the installment of Socialist regimes in the Eastern part of Europe meant the disappearance of whatever form of Central Europe had been previously formulated. The German 'Mitteleuropa' reminded everyone of the horrors experienced during the war, while the other concepts of a distinct 'Central Europe' could not be accepted by the Soviet Union to denominate a region that was part of its Communist Empire. Therefore, the geopolitical status of the postwar bipolar division of Europe allowed only the existence of a Western Europe and an Eastern Europe, both in an antagonistic and tense relation with one another. The official discourse of the Communist

2. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1-39. The identity of a group is defined by its relation to an Other, different and foreign, that is similar in a way to the community but is constructed in opposition to it.

regimes followed the ideological line and expressed this relation to Western Europe as the completely different Other.

However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the forgotten concept of Central Europe re-emerged as an intellectual protest against an oppressive regime, representing the intellectuals' way to challenge the Communist state after all open revolt was crushed (in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and several times in Poland). In these countries, the concept of 'Central Europe' was used in its narrow version, referring only to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, as opposed to the broader version that included all the states between Germany and Russia that fell under Soviet influence after the war. The particularities of this narrow version of Central Europe were based not only on their similar revolts against Communism, but also on shared cultural and historical characteristics.³ This notion specifically had a profound cultural character as political constraints did not permit anything else, and it came close to the idea of a 'middle Europe', of 'the lands between' a free Western Europe and a Soviet Eastern Europe,⁴ clearly opposing the latter but somehow similar to the former.

As the Central European dissident intellectuals strived to distance their region from the Soviet Eastern Europe by insisting on a specific character of their area, they also created a shift in its perceived relation towards Europe: the accent was on the similarity in culture, character and values with the rest of Western Europe as opposed to the East. The discourse on Central Europe promoted within the underground dissident circles integrated the region's culture and identity within the European area, delimitating themselves from the official Communist discourse centred on the Soviet Union. This phenomenon is most noticeable in the works of the respectively Czech, Hungarian and Polish authors Milan Kundera, György Konrád, and Czesław Miłosz.

In 1983, Milan Kundera first published his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe", a text that gave a maximum impulse to the debate on Central Europe

3. Jenő Szűcs, "Three Historical Regions of Europe," in *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, ed. John Keane (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 291–331; Peter Hanák, "Central Europe: A Historical Region in Modern Times. A Contribution to the Debate about the Regions of Europe," in *In Search of Central Europe*, eds. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 57–69; Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

4. Judy Batt, "Introduction: Defining Central and Eastern Europe," in *Developments in Central and Eastern European Politics*, Vol. 3, eds. Stephen White, Judy Batt, and Paul G. Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 9–11.

and highlighted the particularities of the Central European region, its closeness to Europe, and its alterity to the Russian/Soviet civilisation. According to Kundera, after 1945 “several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East”.⁵ Reflecting on the postwar reality of Europe, Kundera insisted on the historical differences between Western and Eastern Europe, an evolution based on religious and political affiliations which situated Central Europe more on the Western side from the point of view of values, religion or traditions. He continued with an expression that characterised Central Europe’s destiny from 1945 until 1989:

As a result, three fundamental situations developed in Europe after the war: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the centre —culturally in the West and politically in the East.⁶

Stressing the similarity to Europe and the desire to copy all that is European, Kundera’s Central Europe finds its Other in Russia/the Soviet Union:

a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, [...] a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space?⁷

The Hungarian author György Konrád also referred to Central Europe and its peoples in his famous *Antipolitics. An Essay*, stressing the “in-between-ness” of the region:

[...] we Hungarians, Czech, and Poles huddle here on the Western

5. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *The New York Review of Books* 31 April 1984: 33, accessed 21 February 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/apr/26/the-tragedy-of-central-europe/>.

6. *Ibid.*, 33.

7. *Ibid.*, 35.

margin of the empire and on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, with a cautious strategy of self-preservation and a troubled mind, because we don't want to identify with the East and we can't identify with the West.⁸

In Central European mythology, the West as an aspiration, a 'promised land', was always contrasted to the East,⁹ as a land of authoritarian rule, economic backwardness and cultural limitations. In Central Europe, the boundaries always fluctuated due to its turbulent history, and therefore people's ways of relating to them was in a relationship that implied a 'we' living here, within, and a 'they', in a positive or negative connotation, living there, beyond, ahead or behind us.¹⁰ Referring not only to the geopolitical postwar situation in Europe, Konrad also argued that the mentality and attitude of the Central Europeans are different from both Western and Eastern Europe: "I am a central European; here my attitudes are Western European, there they are Eastern European"¹¹ and "It is here in East Central Europe that Eastern and Western culture collide; it's here that they intermingle".¹² Contrary to Kundera, Konrad does not insist on Central Europe's alterity to Russia, but focuses on its belonging to Europe and European culture.

The Polish writer Czesław Miłosz¹³ also talked about how Central European intellectuals were looking to the West, hoping for something, whether political, spiritual, or cultural. He referred to Central Europe as a "certain cultural unit, placed in the Eastern orbit by force of arms and by pacts between the superpowers, but maintaining its own identity."¹⁴ In his essay "Central European Attitudes" (1986), Miłosz defined Central Europe as "an act of faith, a project, an utopia even".¹⁵ Here, he discussed Central Europe by means of its shared history and traditions that have imprinted the region with a specific sensibility, even if it is situated between Western Europe and Russia. But despite the common past of this region and the rich ethnic and linguistic diversity that continues to be witnessed in the present of Central Europe, the author makes references to the larger European culture and its influence

8. György Konrad, *Antipolitics. An Essay* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1984), 91.

9. Barbara Curyto, "Barbarians at the Gate... The Ideas of Europe in Central-Eastern Europe," in *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* 5.1 (March 2011): 4.

10. György Péteri, ed., *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 2.

11. Konrad, *Antipolitics*, 128.

12. György Konrad, "Letter from Budapest," in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture* 1 (1982): 12.

13. Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage International, 1981), 37-39.

14. Czesław Miłosz, "Looking for a Center: On Poetry of Central Europe," in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Currents* 1 (1982): 10.

15. Czesław Miłosz, "Central European Attitudes," in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Currents* 5 (1986): 106.

on these territories.

One of the most important consequences of the 1980s debate on the term 'Central Europe' started by these writers' ideas was, therefore, a shift in the manner in which Central Europeans perceived themselves. In its connection to Europe, Central Europe was living a paradox: it sought to differentiate itself from the West, while at the same time it imitated the West.¹⁶ Historically, as a region Central Europe belonged to Europe, and as such it was related to Western Europe, but it distanced itself from Western Europe by means of its traditions and culture.¹⁷ Central European intellectuals perceived Western Europe as a superior civilisation, an idealised utopia, an expression of a dynamic character as opposed to the rigidity and levelness of the East.¹⁸ Towards the end of the 1980s, as a democratic wave swept through the region, the philosophical idea of Central Europe seemed to become a political project. This is the moment when the Central European identity was marked by a transformation in its characteristics and relation to Others, especially to Europe as a whole:

It is characteristic that in their current searchings, Eastern Europeans are satisfied with the label 'Central Europe' when it concerns their immediate socio-political preferences. But when philosophical aspirations, convictions, and attitudes towards history and politics come into play, Central Europe ceases to be the name of the new utopia. A name with a richer and somewhat more universal tradition is invoked instead. This name is 'Europe.'¹⁹

16. Csaba G. Kiss, "Central European Writers about Central Europe: Introduction to a Non-Existent Book of Readings," in *In Search of Central Europe*, eds. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood, 135.

17. Oscar Halecki, "The Historical Role of Central-Eastern Europe," in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 232 (1944): 9-18; Szűcs, "Three Historical Regions of Europe" 291-331.

18. Curyło, "Barbarians at the Gate...": 3.

19. Barbara Torunczyk, "Kings and Spirits in the Eastern European Tales," in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Currents* 7 (1988): 184.

BECOMING ONE: CENTRAL EUROPE IDENTIFIES WITH EUROPE AFTER 1989

After 1989, the idea of Central Europe was used not so much as the expression of the distance from the Soviet Union/Russia but to stress its closeness to Western Europe. The main attitude that drove the political discourse and orientation of the Central European states in the first decade after 1989 was

that of ‘returning to Europe’, bearing in mind that the Europe everyone was referring to was not predominantly that of Western European culture and values, but that of the Euro-Atlantic political, military and economic institutions. Therefore, the main objective that the first democratic representatives stated for their countries in 1989 was to ‘return to Europe’ by asserting their European values, traditions and culture.²⁰ For example, the newly elected president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, stressed the foremost important political goal of the post-Communist Central European states:

Europe represents a common destiny, a common, complex history, common values, and a common culture and way of life. More than that, it is also, in a sense, a region characterized by particular forms of behaviour, a particular quality of will, a particular understanding of responsibility.²¹

After 1989 all public speeches and documents became heavily impregnated with the use of a ‘European’ terminology: such as ‘Europe’, ‘European values and norms’, ‘European Community’ (then ‘European Union’), and ‘European structures’. An interesting aspect of the relationship between Central Europe and Europe as a unit is that up to the second half of 1991 there was much reference to Europe by stressing the common values, traditions, and the need to accept the new democratic states from East-Central Europe into the Euro-Atlantic structures.²² This reflects the uncertainty of the former Communist states about their rapid integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures and it shows that they were using every opportunity to convince Western Europe that they shared the same values and culture. But after the signing of the Association Agreement to the European Union in 1991, the expression ‘our Europe’²³ was frequently used to reflect the former Communist states’ success in their negotiations with the European institutions, but also to reflect that they had been accepted by Western Europe as Europeans.

The relationship between Central Europe and Western Europe shifted rather

20. Václav Havel, “New Year’s Address to the Nation,” Prague, 1 January 1990, accessed 21 March 2009, http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html; József Antall, “The Proposal to dissolve the Soviet Military Bloc, 7 July 1990,” in *József Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary – A Historian in World Politics. Selected Speeches and Interviews*, ed. Géza Jeszenszky (Budapest: Antall József Alapítvány, 2008), 250-54.

21. Václav Havel, “The Hope for Europe,” in *The New York Review of Books* 20 June 1996, accessed 8 December 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1996/jun/20/the-hope-for-europe/?pagination=false>.

22. For example, Václav Havel, “Address to the Polish Sejm and Senate,” Warsaw, 25 January 1990, accessed 21 March 2009, http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html.

23. For example, József Antall, “Hungary’s Role in a Free Europe, 24 June 1992,” in *József Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary – A Historian in World Politics. Selected Speeches and Interviews*, ed. Géza Jeszenszky, 291-296.

quickly in order to adapt to the new geopolitical circumstances: the states from Central and Eastern Europe regained their democratic status, and the Soviet Union imploded under the weight of its own problems soon after. Eastern Europe was no more, so there would soon be no need for Central Europe as all states aimed to 'return to Europe'. The constant reference to 'Europe' and to the 'European institutions' proved that the Central Europeans perceived no longer (Western) Europe as a similar Other, but that they identified completely with it. The Central European identity redefined itself first as the success story of the democratic transition, and then towards the end of the twentieth century as the story of belonging to Europe after being associated with and accepted into the Euro-Atlantic structures. This can easily be seen in all Central European countries, if we follow the preponderance of the use of the term 'Europe' during the 1990s. For example, the European narrative became dominant even in the writings of the former dissident intellectuals from the Central European states, especially in the cases of Václav Havel (who became the first freely-elected president of Czechoslovakia in 1989 and then of the Czech Republic in 1993) and of György Konrád.

From the beginning of his presidency, Václav Havel underlined the need for the Central European states to collaborate in order to build "a whole Europe, a Europe of the future".²⁴ He referred to three different meanings of Europe as seen from Central Europe: a geographical Europe that has a rather impersonal significance; Europe understood as the European Union in the sense of a community of nations that peacefully developed democratic systems, civil societies, and economic prosperity; and a Europe perceived in terms of a "common destiny, a common, complex history, common values, and a common culture" and way of life.²⁵ It is the latter two representations of Europe that the Central Europeans have considerably related to and sought to fully adhere to during the 1990s.

24. Václav Havel, "Address at a Meeting of Leaders from Three Neighboring Countries," Bratislava, 9 April 1990, accessed 21 March 2009, http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html.

25. Václav Havel, "The Hope for Europe".

In the mid-1990s, György Konrád adapted his perspective on Central Europe to the new post-Communist realities that focused on the main objective of

joining NATO and the European Union:

After 1989, Central Europe has grown. When there is no longer an Iron Curtain between Vienna and Budapest, Berlin and Prague, when the two sides of Central Europe will be sooner or later integrated into the same groups and we will all belong to the countries of the European Union, then we will reconnect the past and the horizon with each other, and yesterday's separate-ness will become less important.²⁶

Konrád identified and emphasized catching up with Europe and becoming a full member of its political and economic institutions, and being accepted as such, as new characteristics of the Central European. He based his conception not only on the efforts made by the new democracies in the region, but also on their cultural similarities to European civilization.²⁷

These shifts in European discourse can also be observed in the Central European media, for instance in Poland's bestselling newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. I have analysed how this newspaper's representation of Central Europe was formulated during the 1990s by examining the articles relating to the idea of a Central European community and looking at how this was perceived within the states from the region.²⁸ What I observed was that the first decade of post-Communism shows an evolution in terminology, from 'Central Europe' (used predominantly during 1989-1991 as a legacy of the 1980s debate) to 'Visegrád Triangle/Group' (used from 1991 to 1994, as a form of regional cooperation that marks the closeness to Western Europe by proving the region's success story in terms of political and economic cooperation, but also in stressing its common values and similarity to Western Europe), and in the end, to 'Europe' as in the European Union. These transformations in how Central Europe perceived itself were constantly related to Europe and reflected the efforts to create a favourable image of a group of states that could be easily integrated within the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

26. György Konrád, *Die Erweiterung der Mitte. Europa und Osteuropa am Ende des 20. Jahrhundert* (Wien: Picus Verlag, 1999), 9, (my translation).

27. György Konrád, *The Melancholy of Rebirth. Essays from Post-Communist Central Europe, 1989-1994*. (San Diego-New York- London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 156-157.

28. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 May 1989-31 December 1999.

Therefore, this shows the predominance given to the meaning of the phrase 'Visegrád Group' as a successful cooperation and transition to democracy, instead of 'Central Europe', which was left in the cultural realm, followed by the preference for using the phrase of 'Europe'. In Jacques Rupnik's words, what the Central European states wanted by promoting their success story of transition was to lose the adjective 'Central' as soon as possible and to integrate into the West.²⁹ In 2004, the Central European states finally became full members of the European Union. The need for an external Other was no longer present now that they had become Europeans and were acknowledged by the world as such.

CONCLUSION

In distancing itself from the East and becoming European, Central Europe went through several spatial representations, every time moving a little closer to the West: from Eastern Europeans becoming Central Europeans, and then from Central Europeans becoming Europeans. Throughout the last decades, the Central Europeans' history was defined by two concepts: that of distance and that of closeness, all in relation to the regions and circumstances surrounding them. Central Europe aimed to distance itself from the East and to be accepted by the West as a part of the European family whose characteristics it shared. Although the political circumstances in Europe changed drastically in 1989, Central Europe's cultural efforts to represent itself as part of the European cultural and civilisational realm were continued during the following decade as the result of an associated strong political interest. Starting from the cultural bases formulated by the dissident intellectuals, the European discourse from the Central European states stressed the common values and interests of maintaining peace and uniting the whole continent.

29. Jacques Rupnik, "Europa środkowa," *Gazeta Wyborcza* 104, 6 May 1994, 15.

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