

## **The Myth of Central Europe**

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Using and understanding the concept of Central Europe is a daunting task. It exists on several levels – historical, political, intellectual and literary. To borrow E.H. Carr's concept of the study of history, trying to understand Central Europe is like being on a boat in a vast ocean. Where and how we steer it determines the outcome of our search.

Research on Central Europe is often tainted with ideology and very quickly becomes dated by political developments. One might also question the aim of studying Central Europe when the concept seems to be of no relevance today. Even Milan Kundera, when he was approached for permission to reprint his famous 1984 essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe", saw his text as a product of a particular era and refused to have it brought back to life at a time when those conditions and atmosphere were no longer present.

It is also questionable whether one should enter the debate about Central Europe three decades after the last major eruption of the topic in the 1980s. The last debate was so rich, multi-levelled, inconclusive and controversial that no short essay could ever cover it with any fairness. Since the fall of the communist regimes, general interest, media attention and scholarly reflection surrounding the concept have dwindled. No post-communist society has paid any attention to it and each country has been busy transforming itself in isolation, directing its attention to Brussels or Washington and only marginally to its neighbours.

### **S: Heralds of crises**

We could, or perhaps should, conclude that the transforming post-communist countries have had no interest in anything that was written about or done during the long genesis of Central Europe prior to 1989. However, there are several aspects to the genesis of the concept of and debate around Central Europe, a debate that still resonates, directly or indirectly, in our intellectual discourse today. This is so despite very different predicaments characterising the evolution of Central Europe, which encompassed the twilight of the Habsburg Monarchy, two world wars and the experience of the two worst dictatorships of the twentieth century. Compared to that, we live in a dream world of peace and stability tainted only by the glitches of economic downturns.

Still, according to some authors, developments in Central Europe herald political crises in Europe as a whole. A number of authors – Kundera, Claudio Magris, Václav Bělohradský and György Schöpflin – argue that Central Europe somehow represents a preview, a premonition or an "early warning system" about what awaits Europe. What could it be that makes the Central Europe of the past a forewarning about the Europe of today or the Europe that is to come? This is the key question worth exploring to reflect back on Central Europe as a way to mirror the perspective of Europe today.

Is "Central Europe" a misused and misguided term? Does it refer to something that still exists? Or was Central Europe, in spite of its ethnic and cultural diversity, a source of some kind of unity of shared experience? What were the bonding elements and do they still exist? Was it its subjugation to the Soviet Union that caused the outburst of discussions and studies in the 1980s? These were a few of the many questions I encountered while reading piles of invariably great texts on the topic. Two things were notable: first, the vast majority of these texts belong to a period before the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 and, second, it seems that once freedom arrived, the discussion ended. It was not that the discussion had reached a dead end; it was simply that political events had made the debate obsolete. Today, there seems to be nothing to hold the concept of Central Europe together. Many authors

legitimately ask whether it was just a convenient tool, a myth discarded when it was no longer of any use.

Let us look at the origin of the term and see whether one can trace the elusiveness of the concept to its sources. Interestingly, the concept and name “Central Europe”, or *Mitteleuropa*, were absent during the 19th century and, as Norman Davies discovered, only appeared in the early 20th century. Thus, the Golden Age of Central Europe was only given this name retroactively, in order to legitimise the historical concept. In principle, there is nothing wrong with that; most historical epochs received their names *ex post facto*. However, it could also be, as Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, that all old days become the good days as long as they get to be old enough. Still, looking back at any region of Central Europe around the turn of the 20th century it is clear that there was a richness and diversity in the region that has disappeared with the fall of the Dual Monarchy. Kundera, reflecting in 2005 on the difficulty of defining the *gel* for the regions, saw the unity as almost accidental and unintentional. Often, the essence of Central Europe is best depicted in literary language and for that Joseph Roth is the most prescient. When he describes the quintessential Central European, Count Morstin from Lopatyny a village in Eastern Galicia, there is a flair of nostalgia, diversity and beauty irrevocably lost: “Like every Austrian of that time, Morstin was in love with the constant in the midst of change, the familiar in the variable, the dependable in the midst of the unaccustomed. In this way what was foreign came to be homely to him, without losing its timbre and home had the reliable charm of the exotic.”

### **S: Disruptive unity**

The 20th century brought a false sense of unity to the region that was also very disruptive. Indeed, it made it an object of history. The turning point for most authors is the year 1945. From that point, the concept received a triple blow. First, defeated and divided, Germany could no longer be the linguistic or cultural centre of the region. Second, the majority of Jews perished during the Holocaust and, after the Second World War, those who did not emigrate became fully integrated into the individual societies rather than contributing to a cosmopolitan *gel* that could hold Central Europe together. Finally, at the Yalta Conference, the three victorious powers divided the region. The Iron Curtain that descended physically prevented any interaction among the societies in the region.

On the one hand, Germany had the *lingua franca*, rich culture and political ambition to oversee the region. Before the Nazi period, the German conception of Central Europe provided cultural unity. The dominant culture that united Germans spread into Central Europe as well, integrating the non-German elite. All this ended with the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.

“Central Europe as a civilisation project was crushed by the Nazi war machine,” lamented Karl Schlögel. After the war, German minorities were forcibly removed from various Central European countries and Hitler’s legacy made it forever impossible for Germans to discuss the restoration of Germany to its pre-Nazi position.

The concept of Central Europe was naturally embraced by the Jews, who lived in various societies while preserving their religion and customs. However, during the 19th century, while emancipated, Jews found themselves increasingly isolated among new Central European nationalists who often defined themselves negatively, in opposition to other nations. In Gellner’s words, Jews were “not altogether integrated and accepted and often made to feel uncomfortable” by the majority population.

Paradoxically, the Jews were most integrated in Germany as poignantly described by Amos Oz in a book appropriately called, *Pity of it all*, lamenting the end of this unity. In addition, the German-Jewish symbiosis was also regarded as a unique unifying element in whole Central Europe. The extermination of the majority of the Jewish population removed

this unique bonding element. During the revival of Central Europe in the 1980s, Erhard Busek wrote that “the rediscovery of [the] destroyed and forgotten Jewish world in Europe is one of the key elements of the new discussion about Central Europe.”

The result of the Yalta Conference was the division of Central Europe and, apart from West Germany and Austria, the transformation of the rest of the region into Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. The divisions of Yalta caused a subtle change of focus for authors reflecting on Central Europe. Whereas previous writings on Central Europe had looked forward to the creation of political units, they later became more nostalgic and backward-looking, always relating to culture and a common mind-set. Prior to 1945, most authors and some politicians wished to form a political union, a natural arrangement for a historically and culturally cohesive region. As late as 1942, for example, Milan Hodža, a Slovak politician exiled in the United States, wrote a book called *Federation in Central Europe*, in which he laid down plans for a new political unit after the war. Hodža was the last prime minister of Czechoslovakia before Munich in 1939. Until 1918, he was a member of the Hungarian Parliament, and later became a member of the Czechoslovak Parliament. Having had first-hand experience of politics both in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and democratic Czechoslovakia engulfed by Hitler, he felt the need to create a strong Central European Federation after the war in order to protect small, weak states from becoming victims of major powers.

A few decades after Yalta there was utter silence about Central Europe. To write about it in any communist country would have been illegal and somehow pointless after the triple blows inflicted by the war. A natural candidate to explore the topic would have been Austria, but it was fully paralysed by its own doubts and unclear identity. No longer threatened by Germany and separated by the Iron Curtain from its neighbours, Austria searched for its new identity by distancing itself from “Eastern Europe” and clinging to the West for its own convenience and safety.

### **Return of the debate**

It was four decades after the war before the concept of Central Europe came back. And what a debate it was! It was initiated by exiled writers and intellectuals from the region but also by authors from Austria (Busek, Pelinka) and Northern Italy (Magris). Not a single author wrote about future political plans for the region – this would have meant defying the iron logic of the Iron Curtain and the political compact between the two superpowers. The debate was at least on two levels. The first was related to a nostalgic rediscovery of the somehow interrelated, but lost world of Central Europe – its literature, philosophy and politics. This nostalgic looking-back took place during a period when the region was divided. The Soviet Union, through its policy of “divide and rule”, kept its satellites isolated from each other. The second level of the debate was concerned with negatively defining the various subjugated nations vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. And which nations were those? Czesław Miłosz provided a useful rule of thumb: “Every country [that] was, in August 1939, a real or hypothetical subject of the deal between the Soviet Union and Germany.”

A number of authors, starting with Milan Kundera, have reminded Western politicians and intellectuals that the countries of Central Europe are not – historically, culturally or geographically – part of “Eastern Europe”. Kundera’s essay was originally called: “A Kidnapped West or the Tragedy of Central Europe”. However, when it was published in 1984, *The New York Review of Books* took only the second part of Kundera’s title, judging by the content of the text, the idea of “a kidnapped West” was of equal importance. In fact, the Czech translation of the essay – though not authorised by Kundera – was titled just that: “Unesený západ”.

The publication of Kundera’s essay was followed by an intense debate among Czech and Slovak dissidents. Some accused him of excluding Russians from Europe, others of

making Czechoslovakia responsible for having a communist regime while a third group criticised him for writing about a place where he was not living. Perhaps the most humorous remark on Kundera's text was by Ivan Sviták, who lived in the United States at the time. Sviták, a prominent but eccentric and outspoken exiled Czech philosopher said that the essay by Milan Kundera "aroused more interest about Czech problems than did all the Czech émigré organisations combined together. However, I can find with great difficulty a sentence in it that I would agree with. Interchanging literature and politics is our national misfortune."

### **Central Europe today?**

Paradoxically, with the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 the topic of Central Europe has no longer been a point of focus for these newly liberated societies. No one seemed interested in harnessing the potential of the rich debate that has remained in the air since 1989. Some claim that as soon as the Soviet Union's domination ended, the concept of Central Europe, having fulfilled its goal, was simply dropped. An Austrian political scientist, Antonin Pelinka, who was prolific on the topic in the 1980s, was outright frustrated with developments in Central Europe. He claimed that after 1989 the region has been characterised by a lack of cooperation and an unwillingness to share: by ethnic egoism, unredeemable nationalism and egomaniacal madness. There was one political project, however, after 1989 that seemed to correspond with the spirit of Central European cooperation and friendship: the Visegrad Group initiated in 1991 by three former dissidents Václav Havel, Árpád Göncz, and Lech Wałęsa, then the presidents of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland respectively. The primary aims of the group were to ordinate and mutually assist each other in entering NATO and the European Union. Actually, the Visegrad Group's creation was partially a response to the "ethnic egoism, unredeemable nationalism and egomaniacal madness" that was growing in 1991. The three presidents were disturbed by developments in their societies.

Whether or not Central Europe is a myth depends on one's point of view and on what one expects from it. Certainly, it is a myth if viewed from the perspective of a Hodža who wished to build a political successor to the Hapsburg Monarchy. It is also a myth if we perceive the region as a geographically and politically cohesive unit that was only forcibly separated by the Iron Curtain and the Soviet strategy of "divide and rule". Once free, it has not come back together. What Václav Bělohradský writes about Kundera is valid for the whole concept of Central Europe: "We have to remind ourselves that as a literary construct, Kundera's idea of Central Europe was very useful; as a historical concept it is not realistic."

Perhaps a better term than "myth" for Central Europe is "metaphor". As Claudio Magris writes, "Kundera deprives Central Europe of any political or historical foundation and hence makes from Central Europe a sheer metaphor." Indeed, Central Europe lacks solid and exact borders. Culture, however, does not need those.