

Culture in Central Europe: Possibilities and Preconditions*

The search for a new centre
The search for a conceptual grasp of the term “Central Europe” allows for different approaches depending on the time of the search or the observer’s point of view. Thus, for instance, the scientific understanding provided by “physical geography” plays a role, as does its political-ideological evaluation. Different starting points – be they in the area of politics, the economy, or arts and culture – lead to very different, at times even paradoxical results. The term “Central Europe,” together with the oft-used synonym “Middle Europe” (Mitteleuropa in German), was not only culturally charged until recently, but continues to retain a psychological, even anthropological ring even today. Depending on the subjective perspective, the centre of one moves into the distance of the other.

Nevertheless, the centre has always exuded a special attraction. Periphery and marginality are scorned; no one wants to stand at the margins – or worse, live there. The centre or middle – in contrast to “mediocrity” – is understood as a symbol of belonging, and can be used as an instrument of separation or exclusion, thereby leading to a feeling of superiority. Generally, the centre is positively charged, as we often see in politics. Thus as a political destination it is often equated with “measured,” “moderate,” and maybe

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even “classic,” and the presumed “Golden Mean” is frequently designated as a populist programme.

Even from a purely geographic point of view, an understanding of the situation of Central Europe as the centre of Europe depends on the historical and political perspective one brings to the enterprise. Underlying this is the ever present question of where Europe begins and ends. Over the course of the past 200-300 years – that is, since the departure from the North-South matrix and the onset of the view of Europe from East to West – there has been a historical multitude of “centres,” the justification of each of which depended on the assumption of given “key features.” A legion of candidates have taken part in this historical competition to be the very centre of Europe (for example, Kremnické Bane in central Slovakia, or a monument northeast of České Budejovice in the Czech Republic; the town of Frauenkirchen in Austria even secured a patent for its position as the geographical centre of Europe). If one follows France’s Institut Géographique National and takes Spitsbergen, the Canary Islands, the Azores and the Ural mountains as the outer edges of Europe, then the centre will be in Lithuania (north of Vilnius) and hence relatively far from an EU-centric position. Closer to the European heart, the EU’s eastern enlargement in 2007 saw the centre of Europe in the county of Mainz-Kinzig (specifically in the Hailer/Meerholz district) in the German federal state of Hesse.

In short, the centre does not allow for a definitive interpretation. Instead one can state – as the smallest common denominator in the sense of a first approach to the issue – that Central Europe, in the geopolitical sense, refers to a space that does not correspond to the normal international borders in the region.

The unbearable lightness of the spatial centre

Unlike territorial unambiguousness, especially its classification by the geographically tangible borderlines that until

recently also constituted ideological barriers, Central Europe as the centre of the continent is as malleable as desired, both as far as its size and its importance are concerned. The idea of Central Europe and its spatial self-image has changed throughout history much like a jellyfish changes its shape. Once it extended from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic (with the inclusion of portions of the Ottoman Empire) and divided the continent accordingly. Later, however, it was more narrowly conceived again, though it was constantly grouped around a core area, of which the Pannonian cultural space is undoubtedly part. There was a constant rotation of intellectual expansion and constriction depending on the given requirements of political opportunity and ambition.

The factor of power politics was dominant in the process well into the 20th century. Thus in the course of the 19th century the idea of Central Europe - or Middle Europe - became a political vehicle for extending German influence eastwards. Unlike the colonial states of Great Britain, France and Spain, German imperialism manifested itself less overseas than in its "urge to the East." This is also exemplified by probably the most influential work of the imperial age, a book by Friedrich Naumann, one of the leading liberal German politicians of the time, written in 1915 and plainly entitled "Mitteleuropa" (Middle Europe). It was a blueprint for close economic and military union of the Central European countries under German leadership, as later attempted in a perverted fashion by Hitler. As is well known, these fantasies of political domination ended in the complete and utter devastation of the European centre, in the historically unique destruction of European Jewry, and, following the liberation from National Socialism, in the expulsion of Germans from the countries of Central Europe.

These events went hand in hand with the destruction of pre-modern social structures and the colourful variety of Central

European life, as well as of its multilingualism (and also the end of German as the “lingua franca”). The specific regional cultures were just as fundamentally shaken as the multiethnic patchwork of groups living together and next to each other – and occasionally pitted against each other. Simultaneously, this also meant the end of a primarily German and “dominant” vision of Central Europe. The great division of Europe after 1945 ran through this very centre of the continent, though Austria – almost by a miracle – was spared the fate of its eastern and southern neighbours. For many, this division implied that the fate of the region as it had existed for centuries with various constitutional arrangements was sealed. For Austria, the division meant a dislocation from its historical and geographical context, and an unequivocal political, economic and cultural relocation into Western Europe. The fall of the Iron Curtain brought about a return to Central Europe – above all in the economic sense.

The centre as a theme in culture in the 1980s

Artists, intellectuals and writers have always dealt with the intellectual construct of Central Europe on a creative level, and through their ideas and visions have made a substantial contribution to political discourse on the subject. Following the failed revolutions in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, and the corresponding loss of hope in liberation from Soviet dependence, it was primarily writers and intellectuals who turned to this topic and chose the utopia of Central Europe as a literary theme. The intellectual wealth on the subject does not emanate only from the region itself, but extends far to the West, too, especially France. Among the most influential thinkers are, for example, the “New Philosophers” in Paris (André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henri Lévy), as well as certain émigrés (Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov, who were joined by Milan Kundera in 1978). Austrian discourse on Central Europe, in as far as it exists at all, followed

its own course, and the term was occasionally suggestive of “restoration fantasies.” Not explicitly referring to the latter, Erhard Busek (just as Emil Brix) addressed the issue as a politician and a historically well-versed intellectual, countering the general intellectual apathy when it comes to this subject. Progressive or left-wing thinkers have – with the exception of Anton Pelinka, who appropriately teaches at the Central European University in Budapest – evinced conspicuously little interest in the topic. This intellectual apathy is especially remarkable as there is the background of an ambiguous political hope vested in a “Third Way.” This thus raises the provocative question of whether the reason behind the lack of interest may stem from a certain emotional affinity for the idea of communism, or even the survival of the USSR.

Locally, that is in Prague, Budapest or Warsaw as the centres of Central Europe, the leading figures in this discourse were primarily Václav Havel, who was later to become the first democratically elected president of Czechoslovakia, and the men and women of the Charter 77 around him, as well as Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Andrzej Stasiuk, and Danilo Kis – who passed away early – from the former Yugoslavia. This discourse was entirely marked by the geopolitical circumstances that resulted from the USSR’s dominance. After all, in a certain way Stalinism and many of the variants of communism continued what German National Socialism, jointly with indigenous fascisms in the region, had practiced before, causing lasting damage to – and indeed, even the destruction of – Central Europe and its intellectual and cultural facets.

It is Kundera’s intellectual world which shows most clearly that the Central and Middle European discourse of the 1980s primarily meant a total rejection of the communist concept of Eastern Europe and a turn towards Western European artistic and cultural traditions. For Kundera, the

term “Central Europe” – which he prefers to “Middle Europe” due to the latter’s historical charge – has a “vague, approximating character.” Its borderlines – in as far as one can speak of such – were never permanent, and therefore the people of the region “were rarely the subjects of history, but always its objects instead.” With semantic finesse, he aptly observes: “Central Europe cannot be reduced to ‘Middle Europe’ (a term I never use), as many are wont to call it who only know about it from the Viennese window.” Instead, Central Europe is “polycentric, and appears in a different light depending on whether it is viewed from Warsaw, Budapest or Zagreb.” Regardless of the perspective chosen, however, Kundera always “sees a common history” shining through.

The writer Kundera is more captivated by the arts and culture of the region than by mere history or trite politics. Both in terms of form and innovation, as well as in the attention devoted to the intensity of each word and phrase, he finds most fascinating the brilliant individualists of literature – Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz – “the constellation of great Central European novelists.” For him these writers embody the Central European intellectual par excellence, the epitome of grand anti-lyric poetry. While the Czech novelist acknowledges only very few novels – those of the very writers mentioned above – as typically “Central European,” and hence belonging to world literature, his admiration for the musical arts overflows. “The incomparable strength of Central Europe,” according to Kundera, “lies in its music, which, from Haydn to Schönberg, from Liszt to Bartók, has encompassed all essential streams of European music; Central Europe buckled under the glory of its music.”

Central Europe as a possible European future

The historical concept of “Central Europe” enjoys an attractiveness and undoubted future – not only in a cultural

sense – precisely in light of European integration as an emerging contrast to the system of nation-states, which for now continues to prevail. After all, the traditional nation-states conceive of themselves primarily as unitary states, defining themselves on the basis of the existence of one language, one culture and one identity. They display classic patterns of thought about group identity and demarcation; that is, they are dominated by the exclusive concept of “either/or.” Regions, in contrast, especially ones such as Central Europe (but also smaller ones such as Pannonia), defy fixed identities and by nature tend to indulge in the notion of “as well as.” They are generally marked by multilingualism and involvement in various cultural spheres, though it should be noted that this openness also implies a certain vulnerability. As Central European history has often shown, diversity can carry the seeds of its own destruction, especially when dominant political powers submit to the temptation of fomenting existential fears in their populace for political gain.

Today we are experiencing a special kind of revolution, namely the transformation of maps on the basis of the relativization of state borders, as happened most recently in Central Europe with the expansion of the Schengen Zone and the lifting of internal border controls. This is the result of the emergence of a supranational structure called the European Union. Where this development will lead is still uncertain – despite the “finality of Europe” often invoked by politicians. Especially pertinent is the question of how far Europe will come to see itself as a closed, complete unit vis-à-vis the non-European sphere. For Central Europe and its citizens of various nationalities, this development offers for the first time a real opportunity to actively participate as equals in the most important project of European history: the construction of a veritably unified Europe, the very epitome of a “peace project,” designed to prevent a repetition

of the painful experiences of European history, including those of the recent conflicts of the 1990s.

Creativity is of crucial importance in shaping this unified Europe, especially with regard to Central Europe. Central Europe is no longer a mere object of power politics, after all, and is no longer hindered by an ideological shroud in developing its overarching self-image. Through the fading of traditional borderlines as criteria of classification, with the undreamt-of expansion of means of communication, and with its openness, Europe offers the Central European region new opportunities in every conceivable way. This also means, however, that the challenges and the need for creative engagement increase, since the formation of new barriers must be prevented. The danger of a resurgence of reactionary thinking that demonizes diversity is omnipresent. Civil society, artists and intellectuals have a special responsibility in furthering pluralism. This pluralism ought not to be preached as an exclusive dogma far from any European reality, but in order to be experienced as a real idea it must cede space to regional realities as well. The European Union has to some degree recognized this, for instance when it referred to “regional diversity” in its most recent “Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world.” At the same time, however, it appears that it has not adequately considered the special quality of smaller and medium-sized social structures, and has failed to achieve adequate grounding as a result.

If there is to be – as we all hope – a new and unified Europe, then it can only be a socially structured and culturally differentiated entity. This Europe must be “anchored” in the regional and local sphere to be accepted by citizens and to be successful as a peace project. Localism and the uniformly European mutually complement and reinforce each other, and national self-awareness and the quest for national identity can often be catalyzed by the underlying idea of

European unity. Though this runs counter to the original (idealistic) notion of Europe as a homogenous structure, it opens up the necessary space for the creation of a unifying European identity, without excluding the differentiations experienced locally as the seeds of its destruction. There is no “unitary European culture”; there neither can nor should be. The crucial task is to ensure the space for the persistence of “European cultures” that are mutually intertwined on various levels.

The European thought contained in the EU provides the intellectual foundation for the growing together of the regions. While in the past Central Europe was torn into different ideological zones and between conflicting core values, now for the first time it finds itself united in the peace project of the European Union, where it can fully develop its diversity on the basis of the common European denominator. In places where this Europe is accepted, we can already observe this dialectic process of supranational integration and local differentiation. An increasing number of “Europeans” live and work in this fertile and charged environment.

Culture and the arts are crucial elements in strengthening the necessary dualism of a unified, new Europe and the free development of a Central European identity. History teaches us not only that all types of exclusion – be it in the sense of a European unitary state or in the spirit of the nation-state idea – can lead to catastrophe, but also that the intellectual and creative minds of Central Europe have a special responsibility in strengthening the dualistic discourse. This responsibility consists mainly of constructively reinforcing a separate Central European identity on the basis of European core values, rather than limiting themselves to becoming a reincarnation of the West or the East. The new Europe cannot have a “Western identity” only, or merely serve as a gate to the West; nor can Central Europe be understood exclusively as a gate to the East.

A distinct European identity, especially in the Central European area, is indispensable for Europe's function of peace. The unity of Europe, as a product of this identity and a historic chance for peace in Central Europe after all the conflicts of the past centuries, can only be sustained and strengthened through diversity. The motto of "unity through diversity," a European paradox that has Central European antecedents, is not only a mission for the political sphere, but also for the arts and culture, which serve as a platform for social engagement and dialogue aimed at anchoring European core values while preserving and furthering the cultural wealth of Central Europe. In this respect, not only is Europe an opportunity for Central Europe, but Central Europe's diversity can also be understood as an opportunity for Europe. To enter with a certain sceptical imagination into the dissemination of Europe's cultural fundament, which rests on diversity, appears to me to be the epitome of an artistic perspective.