

Eastern Europe, Central Europe, or East Central Europe? Imagined geography of the region

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse several concepts that expressed different perceptions about the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The article proves that the choice of terminology is crucial in the discussion of the political and cultural identity of the region. The starting point is the Enlightenment concept of Eastern Europe, which suggested the backwardness and secondary status of this region. This concept is confronted with the concept of Slavophilism, inspired by Romanticism. The article argues that this idea, which initially expressed the ambitions of the region's independence, later became an instrument of Russian imperialism. In the concept of Central Europe, as the article proves, there is a certain ambiguity: on the one hand, it contains elements of German liberal imperialism, a special role, especially economic, played by Germany in this region. On the other hand, intellectuals from this region gave the concept of Central Europe an idealized meaning that still inspires many authors writing about the region. Finally, the author analyses the concept of and East Central Europe, which is most justified by academic knowledge, but does not inspire political imagination to such an extent. In conclusion, the article refers to the relevance of some of these concepts and their interpretative potential, which depends on the current political situation.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Central Europe, East Central Europe, Imagined Geography

Introduction

Students of politics are aware of the symbolic meaning of some apparently geographical names. This is true with regard to such terms as Eastern Europe, Central Europe or East Central Europe. They denote some cultural or political entities. It is not a trivial question what terms are used by participants in political discussions. The choice of terminology very often largely determines the intentions and purpose of

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the person who is speaking. In public institutions, especially those dealing with relations with other countries, we have often to do with official guidelines regarding the recommended terms. It is fully understandable. Let me start with one telling example to illustrate this problem. To describe Russia, we often use the term Eastern Europe, but Central or East Central Europe for countries such as Poland or Hungary. These names suggest that Hungary or Poland belong to a different part of Europe than Russia. What term should be used to define Ukraine's place on the map? The choice of terminology in this case is both a political choice and a choice of value system.

The aim of the article is to analyse various, often contradictory, ideas about Central and Eastern Europe. This article is a study of political thought, inspired by the Reinhart Koselleck's semantics of political language. Following his methodological approach, I try to answer some important questions: on the one hand, what kind of "experiences and states of affairs have been expressed in general concepts" and, on the other hand, how these experiences and states of affairs are understood (Koselleck, 2009, p. 103). Concepts such as Eastern Europe, Central Europe or East Central Europe organize the political imagination in reflections on the identity of this region.

We know from the history of political thought that various topics can be considered as political. The political regime has been the major topic of political analysis since ancient times. Modern political thought was fascinated by History. Geography received relatively less space, but it also played an important role. In this case, it is not about geography understood as a science, although sometimes the authors expressed such aspirations. Just as History can be understood as a certain type of interpretation of the concept of time, so geography in this case is an attempt to interpret the concept of space. So, it is rather an imaginary geography. I am interested in various authors, and sometimes also politicians, who drew a map of this part of Europe. This imagined geography has become an important part of political thinking about this region.

The scope of the issues discussed in the article is of course limited. My purpose is to outline some patterns of thinking. So, I will analyse the Enlightenment concept of Eastern Europe, the romantic concept of a separate path of the Slavic world, two visions of Central Europe and East Central Europe. Finally, I will try to reflect on the relevance of these ideas today.

1. Eastern Europe

Looking at this problem from a historical perspective we notice that these geographical terms have been invented quite recently. Until the 18th century Europe was divided into North and South. Such countries as Russia or Poland were regarded as northern countries. The division between Eastern and Western parts of Europe was an invention of the Enlightenment.

Concepts created in the eighteenth century are extremely important not only because it was the first time the aforementioned divisions were introduced, but also because they retain their relevance to a great extent to this day. Although contemporary political thought breaks to some extent with the ideas of the Enlightenment, it must also be said that the political dictionary of the Enlightenment is also our dictionary. Its persistence in relation to the symbolic geography of Europe is one of the aspects of the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Such names as East or West do not carry any objective meaning, they are just cultural constructions. Former Northern Europe was reconceived as Eastern Europe in the 18th century.

There is an excellent book about this subject written by Larry Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Wolff notices various subtleties of the concepts introduced at that time and their consequences for the history of Europe. One of them is the problem of Russia's place in Europe. Today Russia is very frequently regarded as something different than Central Europe, or even as a non-European civilization. What is worth stressing, Russia was included in the Enlightenment idea of Eastern Europe. According to Wolff, Russia was subjected to the same process of discovery, Russia was located and identified by the same formulas between Europe and Asia - between civilization and barbarism (Wolff, 1994).

Larry Wolff's book is a creative development of Edward Said's theory of orientalism. In his book Said says that the West invented the concept of Orient as something completely different, as something outside of Europe in order to delineate the boundaries of Europe (Said, 1979). Wolff demonstrates that the theory of Orientalism can also be applied to thinking about Europe itself.

Larry Wolff's conception of Eastern Europe is something similar to Said's theory but it's not the same. The relation between Western Europe and Eastern Europe is Semi – Oriental, so we cannot say that Eastern Europe was regarded as something outside of Europe, it was rather half - Europe or only partly European.

It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half - this is the thesis of Wolff's book. According to him it coincides with coining the term civilization in the 18th century. That was a new term which re-ordered the way of thinking of European intellectuals. This term imposes hierarchical division upon the rest of Europe. The state of development of Western Europe was regarded as a measure of civilization. The new idea of civilization was the crucial and indispensable point of reference that made possible the articulation of the idea of Eastern Europe. According to this theory, Western Europe invented not only the Eastern Europe but it has also invented itself.

How was the term civilization understood? "This neologism lacked one of its two modern meanings - it did not signify particular civilization in this sense of a unique set of qualities inherent in a given society, nor did it denote an organic historical community." Instead in the 18th century civilization meant an advanced

level of material intellectual and moral development, it was the culmination of mankind's progress (Malia, 1999, p. 27).

Barbarism was meant as the opposite term. On the scale between barbarism and civilization Eastern Europeans were neither complete Barbarians, nor completely civilised. France or England were civilised countries, but Poland or Russia were only partly civilised.

The concept of Orientalization was connected to several things such as hygienic, corporal punishment, slavery or sexuality. Books by travellers from Western Europe who visited countries such as Poland, Hungary and Russia are full of descriptions of dirt, gross poverty and sexual depravity. As always in such cases, it cannot be clearly said whether these books tell us more about the countries described or about the authors who wrote them.

The feeling of being lagging behind, of course, also concerned the region's economy. The countries of this region, with the exception of the Czech lands, have not developed cities to the same extent as in Western Europe. The feudal system has been disappearing in Western Europe since the late Middle Ages. At a time when it had become a complete anachronism in the West, the trend was reversed in the eastern part of the continent. The feudal obligations of the peasants to the nobility were increasing. That was not a slavery in a formal sense, but such comparison has some reasons.

The enlightened monarchs of that time, such as Joseph II Habsburg, the ruler of Austria, and Frederick II, the king of Prussia, also contributed to the negative image of Eastern Europe. The latter wrote about Poles as the Indians, an anachronistic people doomed to extermination. Such opinions had practical consequences. The dissemination of negative images of Eastern Europe justified the conquest of this region. This was how the partition of Poland at the end of the 18th century was perceived by Russia, Prussia and Austria. This unprecedented act of partitioning the territory of a country that had existed in Europe for 800 years could be justified because Poland was presented as a semi-barbaric country that was incapable of independent existence. While Catholic Maria Teresa spoke of the remorse that tormented her in connection with the partitions of Poland, her son Joseph II, a typical representative of enlightened European despotism, treated the lands stolen from Poland as *tabula rasa*. These were lands without their own history and traditions, which only required civilized rule (Judson, 2016, p. 74).

According to the Enlightenment concept of Eastern Europe, this part of Europe is not destined to be backward forever. The Eastern Europe can become more western with the progress in certain areas of life. So, it can become more civilised, but there is one important feature of this civilising process. It is not really a matter of persuasion, but rather an imposition from outside. A good example of such an approach is Voltaire who was fascinated with Peter the Great and later with Catherine the Great. Voltaire saw Catherine the Great and Peter the Great as kings – philosophers, who brought civilization to the East.

The goal of Eastern Europe was to catch up with Western Europe. In other words, the countries of Eastern Europe will achieve their goal when they finally stop being perceived as separate from Western Europe. To disappear from the cultural and political map would fulfil their historical destiny.

Summarizing this part of the article, it is worth emphasizing several features of the image of Eastern Europe created by the thinkers and politicians of the Enlightenment, which have become permanent elements of a certain stereotype. Firstly, the differences between Western Europe and Eastern Europe must be interpreted in terms of historical backwardness. In this relationship Eastern Europe is the student and Western Europe the teacher. Secondly, the task of the Eastern European countries is to find an effective method of imitation. The specificity of this region is never interpreted in terms of a positive value. It is always a sign of lagging behind. Thirdly, it is justified to introduce a kind of beneficiary supervision in these countries. Fourth, these countries are not considered capable of creating an independent political organism in this part of Europe. Fifthly, Russia is an exception, which due to its size and strength should be treated differently. The rulers of Russia, who, in spite of adversities, impose on their society reforms, deserve respect. Power in Russia is the main instrument of the Enlightenment; therefore, it cannot be criticized too harshly.

2. Romantic *Sonderweg* and Slavophilism

Different patterns of political thinking were created in this region under the influence of Romanticism. Romanticism is a crucial period for understanding certain mental matrices that play an important role in shaping attitudes and opinions in this region to this day.

The political ideas of Romanticism were shaped in opposition to the universalism of the Enlightenment. In some Western societies, they clashed with local varieties of the Enlightenment and started a kind of cultural war in these countries. It acquired its most spectacular character in Germany. It is worth noting that in the case of most countries in this region, the Enlightenment was largely a foreign-imported culture, and the local Enlightenment did not take deep roots.

Romanticism inspired the search for identity in this region. For a long time, it supported the conviction that the peoples of this region may choose a separate path from Western Europe. It is worth noting that in the case of individual countries, these searches looked slightly different. In this part of the article, I would like to refer to one idea that has played an important role in the region for a long time - Slavophilism. With a few important exceptions like Hungarians or Romanians, most of the peoples inhabiting this region are Slavic nations. It is therefore not surprising that this played an important role in shaping the perceptions of the region's identity.

Slavophilism was influenced by romantic ideas. In contrast to the Enlightenment concept of civilization, romanticism invented culture. Culture – or

German *kultur* – signified religious, intellectual and artistic fruits of deep internal life. According to romantics there was something superficial in civilization. It was reduced to material life, whereas culture signified profound spiritual life (Malia, 1999, pp. 103-104).

Ján Kollár, one of the founders of the Slavophile movement, was inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder praised the cultures of Slavic people, identifying Slavs with peace, equality and humanitarianism. For him they were truly Christian peoples. For the first generation of Slavophile thinkers such as Kollár, political objectives were not important. In the first place they were concerned with culture. Their objective was the cultural solidarity of the Slavic people. Kollár formulated an educational program for Slavic people. They should learn the principal four languages: Polish, Czech, Illyrian and Russian. These languages should enrich each other (Kohn, 1960, pp. 1-122).

In the 1840s Slavophilism found its political articulation. It is worth emphasizing that initially the ideas of Slavic unity were formulated in relation to liberal and democratic ideas. They were not pro-Russian either. The first Slavic Congress in Prague in 1848 was attended only by two Russian representatives; one of them, the famous revolutionary, Mikhail Bakunin, was a member of the Polish delegation. The best-known example of the liberal version of Pan-slavism is František Palacký. He is regarded as a leading advocate of Austro-Slavism. In 1848 when Germans were organizing the National Parliament in Frankfurt, Palacký was invited as representative of Bohemia, treated by the German parliament as German land. He declined the invitation and in a famous letter to Frankfurt expressed his apology of Austria as a place where small Slavic nations could live peacefully. The idea of Slavic federation under the Habsburg rule was a response to threefold challenges: (1) against the expansive Germany then represented by Frankfurt parliament, (2) against a “domineering Magyar nationalism”, and (3) “Russian universal state” (Palacký, 2007, pp. 324-329).

A less well-known example of the idea of Slavic unity expressed in a democratic idiom was the activity of the Ukrainian Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius. The Society was founded in 1846 and is better known as the Brotherhood of Cyril and Methodius or simply the Brotherhood of Shevchenko. Taras Shevchenko was the most famous member of the Brotherhood, but he was not its founder. The Society was founded by Mykola Kostomarov (1817-1885). Kostomarov, who - like Shevchenko - was born as a serf peasant, gained freedom and got an education, which allowed him to develop his scientific activity. He was a professor at the University of Kiev and for some time at St. Petersburg University.

Although the Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius did not formulate a realistically understood political program, its writings remain an important document of Ukrainian political idealism. In the Statute of the society, written by Mykola Kostomarov, we can read that “the spiritual and political union of the Slavs is their true destiny and the goal to be pursued” (Kozak, 1990, p. 235).

The Society advocated the creation of the federation of Slavic nations in the future, which was to include Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks, Serbs and Lusatians, as well as Croats and Bulgarians. Each of these nations would have wide independence within the federation and would have its own national government. Issues concerning legislation, education, property rights should - according to the statute - be based on the "holy religion of our Lord Jesus Christ". People with appropriate education and moral purity were to work in the administration. Moreover, all nations were to have their representatives in the Slavic Congress (Kozak, 1990, p. 235).

The Society preached liberal ideas about the relationship between power and society. Therefore, it was postulated that the serfdom would be abolished as well as all forms of slavery. Given the historical circumstances under tsarist rule, certainly original and bold was the proposal to abolish the death penalty and even physical punishment. According to the author of an early monograph of the Society, some of their ideas, such as right to self-determination, were promoted by the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. After World War II, these ideas were reflected in UN documents (Sydoruk, 1954).

Even if we consider such an opinion a bit exaggerated, it is worth noting that Slavophile ideas were treated as an announcement of a liberal international order. This is radically different from the fairly common belief that Pan-Slavism meant the unification of all Slavs under the authoritarian rule of the Russian tsars.

Between the liberal Slavophilism and the idea of the unification of the Slavs under the rule of the Russian Tsar were the concepts of the Polish Slavophile Stanisław Staszic. Staszic was one of the leading representatives of the Polish Enlightenment and a supporter of scientific progress. In the face of the collapse of the Polish state, Staszic was looking for a new form of political organization in this part of Europe. In the famous speech he delivered in 1815, he greeted Alexander I and pleaded for a union of the Slavs in the great Russian empire. He believed very naively that such a union of the Slavs would lead to a greater Federation of Europe. It would make wars impossible and assure the permanent peace of the continent. The Slavic nations under Russia's political leadership and under Polish cultural guidance were to bring about a new age in the history of Europe (Walicki, 2019, pp. 225-234).

An important step towards the transformation of the idea of Slavic unity into the concept of Russian rule over the Slavic peoples was the political thought of Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856), the founder of the Slovak national revival.

Štúr was conservative, even reactionary in his political philosophy. He studied philosophy in Germany and was fascinated with Hegel's thought. According to Hegel's philosophy, history is the manifestation of universal spirit. Great cultures or nations bring to the world new universal ideas. As Greeks brought beauty, Latin nations brought truth, Štúr believed that Slavs bring goodness, inherent in their way of life. Slavs expressed themselves in the realm of culture which was the highest and

most human form of expression, in their folk poetry and folk tales. In these areas they have achieved the harmony of man and nature, and of spirit and matter.

In his book *The Slavs in the World of the Future*, published posthumously, firstly in a Russian translation, he proclaimed the superiority of the Slavs over other nations, for they were young and uncorrupted and overwhelmed by the spirit of fraternity. They have saved European civilization against the eastern Barbarians in times of danger. Whereas Slavic world was flourishing, the Western civilization was disintegrating. Like many conservative thinkers in Western Europe he was convinced that the Western civilization was corrupted and lacked faith. In contrast to many progressively minded thinkers he held the view that Western democracy leads to communism and chaos. As a first ideologue of pro-Russian Pan-slavism he praised Russia because only there the ruler and the nation, the church and the people were united.

Štúr didn't believe in the Federation of independent Slavs. The experience of living under the Habsburg rule made him sceptical regarding Palacky's Austro-slavism. Austria was in his view doomed. The only feasible solution for Slavs he saw was unity under a Russian leadership. This famous advocate of the Slovak awakening and cultural independence ended up as a proponent of the conversion of all Slavs to Orthodox faith and in introducing Russian as a main language in all Slavic nations (Štúr, 1983; Janaszek-Ivanickova, 1979; Haraksim, 2011).

Although Štúr's biographers are willing to interpret shift in his views at the end of his life as a result of psychical depression, his views were welcomed in Russia and served as a direct inspiration for the main proponent of Russian Pan-slavism, Nicolay Danilevsky (1822 – 1885). His book *Russia and Europe* is probably the most powerful articulation of the Russian imperial Pan-slavism. He advocated the creation of a powerful economic and military federation uniting Slavs under Russian leadership.

In contrast to the older generation of Russian Slavophiles, whose goal was the defence of certain universal ideas, for Danilevsky the Russian mission was the creation of a powerful state (Walicki, 2002, pp. 363-372). According to him, Europe refused to recognize Russia as an equal to other European powers and assigned it a modest role in civilizing Central Asia. No great nation would be content with such a role. The Russian people were to create a new type of civilization, not only different from the European civilization, but openly hostile to it. This new civilization would only flower after the conquest of Constantinople and the establishment of that city as the capital of Slavic empire united by Russia.

For Danilevsky there are no such things as “universal values” shared by the whole of mankind. The mankind is divided into historico – cultural types (civilizations) that were simply different and that could not be compared in any legitimate way. They live their lives separately and under specific rules for each civilization. The concept of Slavdom ought therefore to be the supreme ideal of every Slav, an ideal standing “higher than freedom, higher than science, higher than education, higher than all worldly goods” (Danilevsky, 1995).

Karl Havlicek, eminent Czech publicist, and early critic of Pan-slavism, has aptly summarized this idea: “The Russians like to label everything Russian as Slavic, so that later they can label everything Slavic as Russian” (Havlicek, 1965, p. 158). The idea of the Slavic unity attracted some people, but with the passing of time became simply a Russian imperial idea in disguise.

3. The Emergence of Central Europe

Another important idea with the ambition of presenting the region as a separate entity both in the economic, political and cultural sense was the German idea of *Mittleuropa*.

The idea of *Mittleuropa* or Central Europe became very influential in 1915 when German politician Friedrich Neumann published in Berlin book with that title. German’s *Mittleuropa* described the domain for German economic and cultural hegemony. It had a direct impact on German foreign policy during the Great War. But the very concept that Central Europe is a region of special interest for Germans is much older. It was especially important with regard to Bohemia. According to František Palacký, who apart from being a great politician and ideologue, was a leading Czech historian, “most of Czech history revolved around the issue of on the one hand confrontation, on the other cooperation between Germans and Czechs” (Wandycz, 1995, p. 23).

As Piotr Wandycz put it: “From the early Medieval times to the final expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Second World War, this antagonism and symbiosis permeated most developments.” The German impact on Poland was also of great importance.

The Hungarian case was different again. Here were large groups of German settlers who enjoyed a special autonomous status, as in Transylvania, and retained their identity. The Germans at certain periods virtually made up the middle class in the country” (Wandycz, 1995, pp. 23 - 24).

The concept of Central Europe as a sphere of German domination was interpreted in several ways. Firstly, it was a sphere of cultural domination. At the beginning of the 20th century Joseph Partsch published a book *Central Europe*, in which he emphasized the role of German language:

“German is understood everywhere from Galatz, Sofia, Sarayewo, Trieste, Geneva, and Antwerp far into the interior of Russia. Only the most backward regions of Servia and Montenegro must be excepted. All the rest of Central [i.e. Middle] Europe, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, belongs to the sphere of German civilization” (Meyer, 1955, p. 109).

What is worth stressing, Partsch used the term “German civilization”, not a “German nation”. Today we take for granted that Germany is a part of the West. But we should keep in mind that for a long time an important part of the German cultural and political elite held the view that Germany represents a distinct civilization. Many

Germans believed in their “separate way” (*Sonderweg*). When the First World War broke out, some German intellectuals claimed that Germany waged war against the West represented by France and England. Even such a great writer, later associated with the pro – Western strand in German culture, as Thomas Mann wrote in 1917 a book *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* in which he underlined this concept of German uniqueness.

In political science we are familiar with the distinction between civilizational state and nation - state (Jacques, 2015). Now there is no doubt that Germany is a nation - state, but for a long time some part of the German elite held the view that Germany is a civilizational state.

Secondly, German domination was interpreted in economic terms. A good example is Franz von Liszt, an Austrian-German law professor at the University of Berlin. He published a book on *Mitteuropa* in 1914. He held the view that the world was being divided into great economic areas. Liszt advocated the formation of the federation of all the nations in Central Europe, by which he understood countries between France and Russia. “He specifically recognized the independence and guaranteed the territory of all member states on the basis of a new international law. Here he saw Germany’s opportunity to guarantee her future as a great power by becoming the *primus inter pares* of a co-operative mid-European order” (Meyer, 1955, p. 141).

Economic domination was emphasized by Neumann in his famous book. It is worth noting, however, that Neumann’s argument was not typical of supporters of economic domination. For Neumann, as Henry Cord Meyer maintains, “economic instruments were to serve a high moral and national objective.” (Meyer, 1955, p. 194) Neumann was not a typical imperialist, he was a German liberal. He distanced himself from chauvinistic German propaganda. “Neumann underlined the inherent right of the non-German nationalities to maintain national individualism and pursue democratic political activity. The Reich-Germans had made many mistakes with the Poles, he felt, and he was convinced there would have to be a thorough revision of the pre-war German psychological attitude towards the Slavs” (Meyer, 1955, p. 202).

To illustrate his vision, a longer quotation is in order:

And over all these [many peoples]..., let us imagine once again the supra-national conception of *Mitteuropa*. It will have a German nucleus, will obviously use the German language, a recognized universal tongue. From the very outset [*Mitteuropa*] ... must display a spirit of compromise and flexibility in relation to all component national groups associated within it, for only thus can essential fundamental harmony develop We Reich-Germans must devote much more genuine attention and care to this basic problem than we have done hitherto, and not just to the problem of political technique, but above all to the feelings of these peoples associated with us unto death (Meyer, 1955, p. 202).

In Neuman's vision *Mittleuropa* was to become an economic bloc, with a German nucleus, but what is worth stressing: it had nothing to do with concepts developed by German chauvinists and Nazi ideologists who regarded Slavs as third rate citizens or slaves.

The idea of *Mittleuropa* played some role during World War Two as an ideological justification of the German conquest. The very concept has been finally discredited by the Third Reich.

4. Central Europe of dissident intellectuals

The Soviet Union domination in the Eastern part of Europe after the Second World War was interpreted in many ways. For the adherents of communist ideology, the communist states were the most advanced countries in their march into the future; they represented the hope for the whole of humanity. These people became quickly disappointed. Others held the view that it was a historical sphere of Russian influence. For those more sympathetic to the nations under Soviet domination they represented Western civilization, but there was not much to do in order to help them.

The tragic experiences of small nations, which for centuries were the object of imperial politics, then experienced externally imposed imperial rule, became the material for important discussion. These experiences became the basis for reflection on the specific identity of this region. In contrast to the Enlightenment concept of Eastern Europe, this new interpretation emphasized the value of this unique experience. Contrary to the Slavophile concept of identity, the emphasis was not put on separateness from Europe, but on a forced separation from the West to which it belonged. Finally, unlike in the case of the German *Mittleuropa*, dominated by one nation, it was emphasized that it was a region inhabited by small nations.

In the 1980s dissidents who opposed communist regimes discovered Central Europe as a worth cultivating, valuable identity (Ash, 1990). Czesław Miłosz, reflecting on the identity of Central Europe, made as the starting point the Ribbentrop-Molotov Agreement of August 23, 1939. According to the provisions of this treaty, the territories of several countries in this region were divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. As Miłosz notes, the peoples of this region were treated as things, which left a deep trauma. This moral lesson is of special importance for the identity of this region.

According to Miłosz “[the] suffering of millions of people living under the terror of totalitarian rule will be doomed to total oblivion if we do not save something valuable from this catastrophe, namely the discovery made by these people that there is a clear dividing line between good and evil, truth and lies” (Miłosz, 2019, p. 445). The peoples of the region saw the importance of this distinction at a time when the concepts came to be viewed as “out of date” in the West. Thus, tragic experiences, “decades of pain and humiliation”, produced a kind of historical imagination different from the Western one. The peoples of this region feel a stronger connection

with the past. Historical imagination realizes “the radical durability, the imperishability of the past” (Miłosz, 2019, p. 448).

Thus, Miłosz emphasized the problem of the existence of a certain type of historical imagination and a shared memory. For him, Central Europe was a moral rather than a political idea. It is difficult to draw any simple political conclusions from his reflection on the identity of Central Europe. Reading the works of other authors writing on this subject in the 1980s, we also notice the proclivity to avoiding defining Central Europe in political terms. György Konrád expressed it most emphatically when he was writing about “anti-politics” as a certain utopia of dissidents in communist countries (Konrad, 1984). A rejection of politics and violence, and an emphasis on the idea of a civil society independent from the state, has been a hallmark of some dissidents’ thinking. This utopia brought some problems after the fall of communism, when some dissidents came to power and could not escape politics. This applies in the first place to Vaclav Havel, who in his time was an advocate of the idea of anti-politics and later became the first president of independent Czechoslovakia.

The author of the most famous work on Central Europe was Czechoslovak writer Milan Kundera. In retrospect, his essay may seem to offer too idealized a picture of Central Europe, but it should be noted that Kundera raised several issues fundamental to the image of the region. Moreover, Kundera has expressed some ideas in a great style, so it is worth citing them more extensively.

For Kundera it was somewhat obvious that Central Europe was a part of the West: “For a thousand years their nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word *Europe* does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word *West*” (Kundera, 1984).

The fundamental issue for the modern understanding of Europe was the idea of culture. Kundera refers to the understanding of this concept introduced by modernism. In modern Europe, it was no longer religion that determined the identity of people, but works of culture, especially literature, which created a space for discussion about the most important issues for the human condition.

Central Europe was hijacked by the East. What was the East? Kundera touches on a problem frequently discussed about the origins of the Soviet Union: Were Central European nations under the rule of Russia or a completely new political entity – the Soviet Union? Kundera is explicit when he says:

“In fact, it’s not Russia but communism that deprives nations of their essence, and which, moreover, made the Russian people its first victim.” On the other hand, in contrast to Solzhenitsyn or Joseph Brodsky, who criticized Kundera’s essay, he doesn’t claim that Russia was just one of the victims of Soviet communism (Brodsky, 1985; Solzhenitsyn, 1978). “But it is no less true – he writes - that Russian communism vigorously reawakened Russia’s old anti-Western obsessions and turned it brutally against Europe” (Kundera, 1984).

The Soviet domination in Central Europe is not just a continuation of the Russian imperial rule, but this problem remains important for Kundera. He categorically says that the historical and cultural identity of Central Europe, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, are completely different. They do not share the same experience.

For Kundera: “[an] ideology of the Slavic world” is “a piece of political mystification... the Czechs, for a thousand years, have never had any direct contact with Russia. In spite of their linguistic kinship, the Czechs and the Russians have never shared a common world: neither a common history nor a common culture. The relationship between the Poles and the Russians, though, has never been anything less than a struggle of life and death” (Kundera, 1984).

Kundera offers a diametrically different assessment of the experience of the Habsburg empire, than that well known from the narrative of “the prison of nations”. To some extent he subscribes to the nostalgic view of the old times Austria widely held in some countries of the former Habsburg empire (Magris, 2019).

“The Austrian empire had the great opportunity of making Central Europe into a strong, unified state. But the Austrians, alas, were divided between an arrogant Pan-German nationalism and their own Central European mission. They did not succeed in building a federation of equal nations, and their failure has been the misfortune of the whole of Europe” (Kundera, 1984).

The most important thing for understanding the specificity of Central Europe is the experience of a small nation. What is a small nation? “I offer you my definition: the small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it” (Kundera, 1984).

The experience of living in an existential threat is something unique that the nations with recognized states in Western Europe have not experienced. It is not only about the threat of physical violence, but also about other ways that undermine their right to life. This is not a new topic in the considerations on the condition of the nations of Central Europe. At this point, it is only worth recalling the famous essay of the Hungarian historian István Bibó, who believed that this experience of life in a state of danger leads to the degeneration of political culture (Bibo, 2015).

Kundera emphasized the special contribution of Jews to the culture of this part of Europe. He draws attention to the role played by outstanding Jewish artists and scholars, but also to their importance in creating an atmosphere of well-understood cosmopolitanism.

“Indeed, no other part of the world has been so deeply marked by the influence of Jewish genius. Aliens everywhere and everywhere at home, lifted above national quarrels, the Jews in the twentieth century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe: they were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity” (Kundera, 1984).

Returning to the title of Kundera’s famous article: What constitutes the tragedy of Central Europe? The most obvious answer, which imposes itself on less

careful readers, is: the Soviet Union forcibly separated Central Europe from the West to which it had belonged for centuries. The second, less obvious, but in a long run probably more important aspect of the tragedy was the transformation of Europe itself. Kundera writes:

“Europe hasn’t noticed the disappearance of its cultural home because Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity. (...) culture, which became the expression of the supreme values by which European humanity understood itself, defined itself, identified itself as European” (Kundera, 1984).

In Central Europe’s struggle to preserve its own identity, the aim is not only to defend itself against Eastern barbarism, which is a well-recognized threat, but also to preserve a culture which is disappearing in Western Europe.

“Central Europe, therefore, should fight not only against its big oppressive neighbour but also against the subtle, relentless pressure of time, which is leaving the era of culture in its wake. That’s why in Central European revolts there is something conservative, nearly anachronistic: they are desperately trying to restore the past, the past of culture, the past of the modern era. It is only in that period, only in a world that maintains a cultural dimension, that Central Europe can still defend its identity, still be seen for what it is. The real tragedy for Central Europe, then, is not Russia but Europe...” (Kundera, 1984).

Such an idealized image of Central Europe is easy to criticize. For some critics, Central Europe was more a myth than a reality (Todorova, 2014, p. 301 - 344). One can notice, for example, the lack of reflection on the consequences of nationalism of small nations, national conflicts and native anti-Semitism. You can also wonder if communism was simply a system imposed from outside and did not have any native roots? Such criticisms have been made (Ash, 1986). The significance of Kundera’s essay, however, is not in its historical accuracy, but in its attempt to create a noble myth. For a myth, contrary to what the proponents of the Enlightenment claim, is not simply a denial of the truth. Myths, as Georges Sorel wrote, are great visions that inspire action, encourage the mobilization of will (Sorel, 2014).

5. East Central Europe

Contrary to the previously analyzed concepts, the term East Central Europe is the least emotionally charged. This is hardly surprising as it was coined by historians who wanted to emphasize the different experiences of this region without evaluating the term. For such historians as Jenő Szűcs, Oskar Halecki or Piotr Wandycz, different historical experiences have shaped the cultural identity of this region (Szűcs, 2015; Halecki, 2002; Wandycz, 1995).

The first author who introduced this concept into the academic discourse was Oskar Halecki, a Polish historian working in exile in the United States. In his book *The*

Limits and Divisions of European History, he postulated a fourfold division of Europe: Western Europe, West Central Europe, East Central Europe, and Eastern Europe. For Halecki the division into Eastern Europe and Western Europe blurs the distinction between the region and Russia. According to Halecki, East Central Europe is part of one European community, it has been shaped by similar ideas and spiritual traditions. Due to its geographic location, this part of Europe was more exposed to external dangers. Due to invasions coming from the East, East Central Europe has been in its history cut off from the Western part of Europe (Halecki, 2002).

Above mentioned historians emphasize that we should remember about important differences between such countries as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary on the one hand and Russia on the other hand. All of these countries have Christian origins, but Christianity came to Russia from Byzantium and to other countries from Rome. The consequences of this fact are far-reaching. Critics of Russian political tradition emphasized that it had a very negative impact on the Russian history. The subordination of the church to the state stood in the way of laying the foundations for political freedom. Such attempts to subordinate the church to the state have not succeeded in Western countries (Pipes, 1995; Kucharzewski, 1948; Szamuely, 1974).

As Piotr Wandycz pointed out, Central European countries were shaped by the great historical currents: Medieval Christianity, Renaissance, Reformation and Counter - Reformation, Enlightenment, the French Revolution and others. These currents were absent or almost absent in Russian history. Whether it is good or bad, the opinions diverge. Russia's sense of its uniqueness and special mission has always been its characteristic feature.

There is no doubt that Central and Eastern Europe differed from Western Europe in terms of economic development. Economic backwardness has been recently diminished, but still it matters. One of the consequences of this backwardness is a feeling of inferiority, which has been compensated for by a glorification of national history and national uniqueness. Poles, Czechs, even Slovaks all referred to their countries as the heart of Europe. Hungarians and Poles regarded themselves as the bulwark of the West (Masłowski, 2020, pp. 31-48; Wandycz, 1995, p. 14, p. 17).

Following Piotr Wandycz, we can sum up the specificity of East Central Europe in several points:

1. The state often stood in opposition to society. The consequence is a strong distrust of the state which is frequently treated as alien.
2. All countries experienced in their history interrupted statehood.

“Interrupted statehood resulted from such traumatic events as the Hungarian defeat at the battle of Mohács in 1526, the lost battle of the White Mountain in Bohemia in 1620, or the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. The first of these events led to a threefold division of Hungary that lasted about a hundred and fifty years. The second endangered the very survival of the Czech nation. The last

effaced the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the political map of Europe. For over a hundred- and twenty-years Polish lands were partitioned between Austria, Russia, and Prussia “.

3. Discontinuity has thus been a major issue in East Central European history, and is distinctive for the region.

4. Another unique feature of East Central Europe was the presence of the Germans and Jews.

I have already mentioned the important role played by the Germans. It is worth recalling, at least in a few words, the special role played by the Jews. For centuries, Jews flocked to the countries of this region, first of all to Poland, fleeing persecution from Western Europe. Currently, we look at the history of Jews in this part of Europe mainly through the prism of the tragedy of Jews during World War II. The history, however, is much more complex. It is worth remembering that for a long time Prague was a city where Jewish culture flourished. Cities such as Vilnius and Budapest played a similar role.

5. *An important feature of the self-understanding of many of the region's inhabitants is the special role of the fight for freedom. The mythology of the fight for freedom plays a key role in Polish culture. In the period between 1794 and 1944, ten national uprisings broke out on Polish territory. In the history of Hungary, the uprisings of 1848 and 1956 are the most important events in this country's culture of remembrance. The same can be said about the 1968s revolt in the case of Czechs and Slovaks* (Wandycz, 1995, pp. 11-27).

Conclusion: what after the return to Europe?

After the Second World war the term Eastern Europe was widely used, it became synonymous with the Soviet bloc. “The dependence of this region on the Soviet Union received a kind of historical legitimization, it seemed as if these lands fulfilled their destiny by becoming part of the Russian led communist empire.” (Wandycz, 1995, p. 371) In the eyes of some pro-communist commentators, communism appeared as the move toward modernization of this part of Europe, which quickly turned out to be a great illusion.

After the collapse of communism, it seemed that the old division between Western and Eastern Europe was going to disappear. The most widely used term in social sciences in the 1990's was transition. Post-communist countries were on their way from authoritarian or totalitarian communism to democracy and from centrally planned economy to free market. Still there was a common denominator for these countries – they were post-communist and they were in the state of transformation. But it was supposed to be just a temporary condition.

There was something optimistic in the theory of transition. It implied that there is one model of development and there are no fundamental debates over the future. According to the famous book of Francis Fukuyama liberal democracy represents

the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). Liberals in the post-communist countries interpreted political and economic changes in this part of Europe in terms of “there is no alternative” (Korkut, 2012). Leading liberal political philosopher in Hungary, János Kis claimed that there is no legitimate moral alternative to liberal democracy (Kis, 2019, p. 12). In other words, people who represent different political positions have no legitimate place in a civilized political debate. Some conservative critics of this way of thinking even liken liberals to communists. For Polish philosopher and conservative politician, Ryszard Legutko, there are striking structural similarities between liberal and communist ideologies. Both ideologies serve to consolidate the peripheral status of the region of Central and Eastern Europe (Legutko, 2018). Such statements would seem shocking in the 1990’s, but twenty years later have found many adherents (Bluhm and Varga, 2019).

It is easy to discern that the concept of transition comes from the Enlightenment idea of progress. According to this theory, all countries take part in the same journey. They differ with respect to how much they are advanced in this travel. In the 1990’s there were endless debates whether Poland or maybe Hungary or Czech Republic is more advanced in their transition.

In the 21st century the concept of transition has lost its intellectual credibility. More than thirty years have passed since the collapse of communism. It doesn’t make any sense to talk about endless transitions. Today the specificity of Central and Eastern Europe is interpreted differently. The image of this region is changeable. It depends on ideological position. Sometimes it is more favourable. According to a more positive view, held both in this region and Western Europe, East Central Europe is more conservative than its Western counterpart. Despite some superficial similarities, this position has nothing to do with the theory of Slavophilism popular in the nineteenth century. The latter theory has been discredited by the excesses of Russian imperialism. Russia’s war against Ukraine only deepens the already highly discredited image of Russia. It is also difficult to defend the view of Central Europe as a special sphere of German domination. Although Germany remains an economic power in this region, it is not a sphere of strong influence of German culture. After World War II, most Germans either left the region voluntarily or were forced to do so. The memory of World War II is still so strong that the claim about a special political role for Germany in this region seems too controversial.

Probably the prevalent opinion is that East Central Europe has been unable to overcome its past. The legacy of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is still a burden for this region. It cannot escape from its own history (Tismaneanu, 1998; Tismaneanu, 2020, pp. 289-332). This perspective has been also adopted by many people from this part of Europe. There are many people who hold the view that the main purpose is to emulate Western patterns of development.

Some critics of this way of thinking even speak of the presence of colonial patterns in the perception of East Central Europe. While it is unacceptable for many Europeans to look at the former colonial peoples with a sense of superiority, this

perception of the eastern part of the continent is accepted (Nowak, 2021, pp. 29-30). Representatives of the region are trying to rehabilitate and revive older concepts of regional identity. Such ideas include, for example, the well-known concept of the *Intermarium* - close cooperation between the countries lying between the Adriatic, Black and Baltic seas (Laruelle and Rivera, 2019). This concept has been popular in Poland, Romania, and for some time also in Croatia, but to a much lesser extent in countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine will certainly contribute to a redefinition in the perception of this region. It is difficult to say with certainty what it will be. It is now evident that the war has revived one of the myths strongly present in this region - the bulwark of Europe. (Riabczuk, 2022, p. 235)

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