

Central Europe's boundaries yesterday, today and tomorrow - lecture given at "Colloque Frontières", University of Strasbourg 12-14 November 1999

The problem with even attempting to define Europe's boundaries can be illustrated by the fact that the definition of the very heart of Europe – Central Europe – has shifted over time and has been determined by political, rather than geographical points of departure. Even today after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the return of the previous Soviet satellites to Europe the rule "tell me how you define Central Europe and I will tell you who you are" still applies.

In the mid-19th century the term mainly referred to a hypothetical economic union based on Prussia and the Austrian countries but with a geographical span from Copenhagen to Trieste. After Bismarck succeeded – with blood and iron – in creating his German Empire, Europe's military and economic centre shifted eastwards and Central Europe came to be defined roughly as the area between Germany and Russia, with Vienna as its focus. But with the fall of the tsardom and the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires after the first World War the perspective moved once again. Poland re-emerged, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were created and Hungary and Austria were reduced to minor states. So which countries actually belonged to Central Europe now? What was east and what was west in an area in which the political boundaries had been rearranged beyond recognition in the course of a lifetime?

According to one definition Central Europe was the area which neither belonged to the kingdom of Charles the Great nor was Orthodox. It had no fixed boundaries – and therein lay its fascination. It consisted of peripheries: Bohemia, Moravia, Istria, Vojvodina, the Banat, Croatia, Slovakia and Galicia. Central Europe, or "Mitteleuropa" was an area where cultures crossed and mixed, an area with a confusing linguistic and ethnic diversity, but where cultural coexistence was nevertheless possible.

However, it acquired another significance in Germany. Here "Mitteleuropa" was the title of a much debated book written by the German social politician and evangelical theologian Friedrich Naumann in 1915, as a contribution to the discussion on the objectives of the ongoing German warfare. By "Mitteleuropa" Naumann meant a German sphere of influence in Central Europe, where Germans and German-Austrians would join Magyars and Slavs around themselves in a political union powerful enough to exert itself both westwards and eastwards.

Not surprisingly, Germany's neighbours had a different interpretation. For example, Tomas Masaryk, the first Czechoslovakian president defined Central Europe as "a distinctive zone consisting of small nations which stretches from the North Cape to the southernmost point in Greece and includes Lapps, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Sorbs, Czechs and Slovaks, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Romanians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Turks and Greeks, but no Germans or Austrians".

Hitler was to discredit the German definition of the concept "Mitteleuropa" even further. The Nazi expansion policy and demands for a German "Lebensraum" were

initially directed at exactly this area: Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia were invaded, Hungary became the first fascist satellite state and Croatia and Slovakia were partitioned to later play a similar role.

The Kidnapped West

Thus during the Cold War, "Mitteleuropa" quite simply disappeared from the map. The ideological war that emerged between the two political systems in post-war Europe did not permit a third path or any geographical buffer zones. Instead a completely new geopolitical structure was created. Western Europe had previously never extended to the River Elbe while Eastern Europe had never included Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia or Slovenia. To quote the exiled Czech writer Milan Kundera, a few nations who had always regarded themselves as Western woke up one fine day to find themselves in the East. Historical characteristics, geographical affinities and cultural fellowship had been thrown out of the window to be replaced by demonstrations of loyalty towards Washington or Moscow. While the inhabitants of Munich were expected to synchronise their heart-beats with those of New Yorkers, Germans in the more westerly towns of Weimar and Wismar were expected to speak with the same voice as the citizens of Moscow. The tramway between Vienna and Pressburg (Bratislava) was demolished. Families who had previously commuted to each other at weekends were torn apart and separated by a barrier that was as impenetrable as it was unnatural. What had once been the heart of Europe was transformed to a borderland. Instead of being neighbours, Central Europe's metropolises became end stations, border or even frontier towns.

Not until almost 40 years after the division of Europe did the term "Mitteleuropa" or Central Europe made a true comeback. The debate was initially raised by intellectuals from the very states that had been affected the hardest by Europe's division, and it got going in 1983 after Milan Kundera published an essay with the title "The Kidnapped West" while in exile in Paris. The Hungarian György Konrad, the Yugoslavian Milovan Djilas and the Pole Czeslaw Milosz, as well as several other East European intellectuals brought up the same subject of a common Eastern-Central European area, which still constituted a part of the old Europe but which, enslaved by Russia, was gradually disappearing, without anyone paying attention to the fact in Western Europe. For György Konrad the concept was about "a philosophy and not about citizenship". He defined Central Europe as "a dream that has been overshadowed by the East-West conflict, disguised by watchtowers and checkpoints and glossed over by loud ideology, tedious materialism, routine civilisational glitter and fat consumerism". Milan Kundera saw Central Europe as the part of our continent which "geographically lies in the centre, culturally in the West, and politically in the East". Central Europe could not expect anything from Berlin: "Surrounded by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other these nations were forced to devote their energy to a fight for survival and for their languages. Incapable of arousing enough interest in the European consciousness, they remained the least known and most vulnerable part of the West, on top of everything hidden behind a curtain of peculiar and inaccessible languages". According to Kundera Central Europe was "culture and fate" and had nothing to do with states. "Its borders are imaginary and must be amended and redrawn in every new historic situation".

Both György Konrad and Milan Kundera as well as the latter's compatriot Vaclav Havel, used the term Eastern Europe to describe negative phenomena, while Central Europe or "Mitteleuropa" had a more positive, affirmative and often sentimental ring to it. Central Europe stood for all that was democratic, rational and western in their native countries while Eastern Europe was associated with the negative aspects. All the "Dichter und Denker" (poets and philosophers) belonged to Central Europe while the post-war "Richter und Henker" (judges and executioners) were ascribed to Eastern Europe.

In his collection of essays on Central Europe, "The Uses of Adversity" the British contemporary historian Timothy Garton Ash notes that Adam Michnik, and many other Polish intellectuals, never used the term Central Europe. They did claim that the small states between Germany and the Soviet Union, through national rivalries in the interwar period, had contributed to their own ruin and therefore needed to cooperate if they should once again regain true independence. However, most Poles continued to look to the East, not only emotionally and culturally but also geopolitically, at the areas which for centuries had been a part of the historical Poland. Both in his poetry and his prose Czeslaw Milosz wrote of a lost, semi-mystical Lithuania and, Ash points out, even Pope John Paul II, when he talks of Europe, looks not just beyond Europe's synthetic borders to Prague, Budapest and his beloved Krakow, but even further over the Pripyet marshes to the Ukraine, White Russia and the onion domes of Zagorsk.

Central Europe as a protest against the division of Europe

In Germany the term was first introduced into a wider debate in 1986 in a book by the Berlin author Karl Schlögel entitled "Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Die Deutschen, der verlorene Osten und Mitteleuropa". Schlögel referred to Kundera's thesis of a common Central European cultural area, which had always felt affinity partly with Prussian Germany and partly or, in particular, with the great power in the East, first with its strange Byzantine Christianity and later with its Communist teachings.

Also in the Federal Republic the renaissance of the term Central Europe led to a debate on how the region should really be defined. Was, for example, Mitteleuropa's western border coterminous with that of the Federal Republic or did it run straight through West Germany? Bavaria, with its proximity to Czechoslovakia and its historical connections with Austria and Bohemia belonged without a shadow of a doubt to Central Europe, but could Schleswig-Holstein and the Hanseatic towns also be included, and what about Niedersachsen and Hessen? Could Adenauer and Kohl be described as Mitteleuropäer? Was it a coincidence that it was a Rhinelanders who, after 1949, had been the driving force behind the Federal Republic's association with the Western alliance while Berliners, Saxons and North Germans drove through and later consolidated the new policy of the East? Or was it still the case that the "linksrheinischen Katholiken" (Catholics from the left of the Rhine) regarded Charles the Great's Aachen as Europe's true capital and considered its eastern border to run along the River Elbe?

Even if there were differences in opinion, the West German debate on "Mitteleuropa" was nevertheless characterised by the view that both German states formed the centre of Europe: "The Federal Republic has become the East of the West, and the GDR the

East's West. Despite this situation of being a double periphery Germany will continue to be characterised by the fact of its position in the middle of Europe. Even though the middle is divided it remains the middle." This is how the Federal President von Weizsäcker expressed the matter in what has now become a classic speech from 1985 ("die Rede").

This definition could be described as the basis for most German contributions to the debate on "Mitteleuropa". In the parallel discussions in Austria, however, the geographical definition was quite another. There was often an unmistakable element of nostalgic reverie of K-Kania, and the dual monarchy was no longer regarded as a people's prison (Völkerkerker) but as an example of a possible means for cooperation across the wall that divided Europe. In the concrete proposals for cooperative projects presented in the Austrian debate, however, Central Europe appeared primarily to be synonymous with the basin of the Danube and the Italian parts of the Habsburg Empire. The debate, which was mainly limited to intellectual circles in Vienna and Eastern Austria but did not succeed in inspiring any interest in the Tirol or Vorarlberg, was met with unease from several directions, especially among those with the conviction that Austria belonged in Western Europe and who advocated membership in the EC. According to this line of reasoning, an overemphasis on a Central European community could be interpreted as an acceptance of just as great an affinity with the Balkans as with Western Europe. For the many Slovenes and Croats who did not feel at home in a multinational south-Slav federation which included other peoples who had never belonged to a European empire, the term Central Europe became a question of what periphery one belonged to – the Serb-dominated Yugoslavia or the part of Central Europe constituted by the old dual monarchy. The explosive force of these different currents later appeared to take Western Europe by surprise.

Even in the once Austrian parts of Italy, where a "civiltá mitteleuropea" had been created, nostalgic tendencies and protests against the modern Roman rule were manifest – sentiments that later, among other things, resulted in the formation of the regional party Lega Nord.

For many people on either side of the iron curtain which had divided "Mitteleuropa", however, the concept was synonymous with a distinctive culture and way of life with common customs and practices, an area where tomatoes are called "paradise apples" in the respective languages (even German) and horseradish is called "kren", an area with plenty of coffee houses, baroque churches with onion-shaped domes and where railway stations and school buildings have a particular yellowish tone; in short an environment in which an inhabitant from Munich can, despite everything, still feel almost at home should he care to stop by in Sibiu (Hermannstadt) in Romania and which immediately feels familiar to a Slovene from Ljubljana who visits Krakow or Vilnius.

Another category saw the European Judaism as the most important bearer of the characteristics that made up "Mitteleuropa". From this perspective, the concept was wiped off the map entirely with the holocaust. In these circles, the debate was seen primarily as a transnational "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" and as an attempt to reconstruct a spiritual and historical geographical zone characterised by the German-Jewish cultural heritage and inhabited by people who, to quote the Czech writer

Johannes Urzidil, regarded themselves as "hinternational", that is, living "behind the nations". An example of such a "hinternationalist" was Franz Kafka who called himself an "inhabitant of Prague, but not a Czech, a Jew but without a Jewish roothold and an author in the German language but assuredly no German". A third category saw the term as synonymous with oppression on nationalistic and ethnical grounds. The claims of a Central European kinship were said to be nothing but a cliché. In reality this area had been, already in the 19th century, a main battlefield for chauvinistic antagonisms, where every nationality constituted an impediment to the emancipation of one or several others. Furthermore, the intellectuals in the interwar period's Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia had very little in common. When looking beyond their own borders, their eyes did not turn to Moldau, Weichsel or the Danube but across Vienna and Berlin to London and Paris.

In this supposedly so tolerant environment, to take Galicia as one of many examples, the German-Austrians oppressed the Poles, who later pursued the Ruthenians, who in their turn harassed Jews and Gypsies.

According to the sceptics, Czechoslovakia's fate after 1938 also showed that all talk of a region that viewed itself as a third option and a common answer to superior neighbours in the East and West was nothing but a myth. Once Hitler had conquered his part of the first Czech Republic its other neighbours were quick to make themselves heard, each with greater claims than the other. The Teschen area fell to Poland, the areas east of Bratislava became Hungarian, the remaining Slovakia declared its independence and Karpato-Ukraine wanted to become an autonomous area but was instead incorporated into Hungary. Neither could one, however much one wanted to, according to the critics, claim that the population in the German "islands" in Eastern Europe had any feelings of kinship with their Slavic, Hungarian or Romanian neighbours or that there was any kind of mutual "us-and-them" feeling that united Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians against the Russians.

On the contrary, a chauvinistic pioneering spirit emerged in German centres such as Bromberg (Bydgoszcz), Riga, Thorn (Torun), Kronstadt (Brasov), Fünfkirchen (Pecs), Lemberg (Lviv), Czernowitz (Tjernivtsi) etc. and in the German communities in the Eastern European peripheries Germanism bloomed with full vigour. Inns with names like "Zum deutschen Haus" or "Zum preussischen Adler" were significantly more common there than they were in Germany or Austria.

To summarise, the renaissance of the term "Mitteleuropa" can primarily be explained as a protest against the division of Europe which stemmed from a growing realisation that our continent was something considerably larger than the EC's 12 member states, and which had a decidedly greater potential content than the inner market that was being promoted as a European utopia. "A Central European is each and every individual who feels hurt, concerned, obstructed, closed in or worried about the division of our continent" wrote György Konrad in his essay "The Dream of Central Europe". Gorbachev's perestroika with the hopes it aroused, not only of a reform of the political system in the East, but also of a new openness towards the West therefore became an additional source of nourishment in the discussion on Central Europe.

In the Federal Republic the peace movement began to see the realisation of a Central European community as a way to escape the nuclear Sword of Damocles which had been suspended over the area by the two military blocs. Liberated both from the Bolshevik yoke and from the position as an American vassal, the whole region would join together to face a brilliant future. The Green Party, in particular, tried to capture this mood with proposals for the formation of a "Central European Union for Peace", which would lead to the gradual dissolution of the two military blocs. According to this reasoning, the two German states would serve as a bridge between East and West during this period of neutralisation. The Social Democrats thought along similar – although not quite as far-reaching – lines. During the first German-German historians' congress arranged in March 1987 by the Social Democratic Party in Bonn, the then Party Secretary Peter Glotz argued that the concept of Central Europe should be used as an instrument in the second phase of the policy of détente.

In conservative German circles, the concept was viewed as a return to German unity. In a potential conflict between the two blocs both German states were predestined to form the battleground. In 1987 the CDU parliamentarian Bernhard Friedmann wrote the book "Unity not missiles. Theses about reunification as a security concept". Federal Chancellor Kohl dismissed this work as "downright nonsense". Honecker's visit to Bonn in the autumn of 1987 contributed to a further popularisation of the idea of a particular Central European community. Thus two years before the fall of the wall, reunification appeared to have been definitely postponed to a utopian future, in which Europe's military blocs had had their day and Gorbachev's European home had become a reality. Until this was accomplished, it was important to expand contacts not only with the GDR, but also with the whole of Eastern Europe, in as many areas as possible.

Thus the concept of Central Europe was developed into a sort of community of interests for the areas of pre-war Europe hardest hit by the division of Europe. In the dramatic developments which culminated in November and December 1989, this played an undeniable role exactly as a concrete reminder of a not too distant past and of the fact that Siberia did not begin at Checkpoint Charlie, that East Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest had a different geographic location from Kiev and Minsk and that Prague in fact lies to the west of Stockholm. However vague they may have been and whatever the underlying reasons, the discussions about "Mitteleuropa" had certainly served a purpose. In his above-mentioned book "Die Mitte liegt ostwärts", Karl Schlögel expressed the hope that the concept "Mitteleuropa" would "serve in our minds as a provocation against the wall in our heads". In this respect I think we can say that his prayers were granted.

Where is Central Europe today?

What role can the idea of a distinct Central European community play today when Europe's division is a thing of the past? There is no longer a demand for a buffer zone or cordon sanitaire in the middle of the continent and any form of grey area would be an obstacle along the road to a united Europe. The explicit political objective on both sides of the previous wall today is integration, not separation. A new geopolitical situation has arisen.

But what do these countries have in common now that the Soviet tanks have disappeared? President Havel hoped that Central Europe would become a counterbalance to the growing nationalism and that regional solidarity would prove stronger than national rivalries. In reality, Central Europe turned out to be the vision of a minority. Not only did Yugoslavia fall apart – Czechoslovakia was also divided and prime minister Klaus feared that the concept of Central Europe would be used as a parking lot or waiting room for states that wanted accession into the EU but who, for various reasons, could not be admitted immediately. He said that he could accept the concept if it were to include Austria and Germany too. According to Klaus the creation of Slovakia meant the definitive disappearance of an optical illusion. There was now a buffer state between the Czech Republic and Central and Eastern Europe, which has once again rendered Bohemia and Moravia natural parts of the West and made the Czech Republic a West European state. From his point of view, therefore, Central Europe is a no man's land, a "Zwischeneuropa" between the West and the East. Even the Slovenes viewed their secession from Yugoslavia as a return to Europe. They considered themselves to have closer allegiances with the Czechs than the Croats, a view that was met with approval in Prague, where partly in jest and partly in seriousness, one spoke of Československo (Czechoslovenia) instead of Československo (Czechoslovakia). From a Slovenian perspective, Zagreb belonged to the Balkans, while Zagreb, in turn viewed Central Europe's outer boundaries to be identical with those of Croatia and Serbia.

As for Poland, it turned its attention in several directions: to Germany, its southern neighbours, the new states in the East, primarily Ukraine and, beyond that, Russia and to Scandinavia. Hungary regarded itself as occupying a natural position in Europe, not least in view of the role the Government in Budapest had played in triggering the 1989 revolutions. At the same time, Hungarian nationalists viewed Central Europe as an opportunity to re-establish Hungary's former hegemony in the basin of the Danube.

Central Europe, therefore, means different things not only for, but also within all its potential member states. Its contours remain unclear even after the collapse of Communism. "Central Europe is a vast area with unanswered questions and unresolved contradictions, an area of half-hearted claims which have been realised just as little as their counter-claims, and which seem to be an expression of visionary whims since they have something whole, something new and immense as their goal".

These words were written by the theologian and philosopher Bruno Bauer in 1854. His definition could be said to apply even today. "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose."

Where will Central Europe's boundaries run tomorrow?

Now, suddenly, a historical European border has become a topic of debate again. The contrast between Eastern and Central Europe and South-East Europe is increasing and the boundary is the same as the one that once divided the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires or Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. The cultural boundary ultimately dates back to the division of the Roman Empire in 395 (AD) between a Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire and a Latin (Western Roman) Empire, which was later completed with the formal division of the Church between Orthodoxy and

Catholicism in 1054. When the Lithuanians, as the last European people to be Christianised in 1387 chose Catholicism before Orthodoxy a religious and cultural boundary was consolidated, a boundary which has remained right into our times and which involved bloodshed during the war between Serbs, Croats and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

In some places this boundary between the Latin and the Orthodox Europe is regarded as eternal and immovable – a conceptual barrier more impenetrable than any iron curtain. The Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington, in particular, has brought credibility to these perceptions with his theses on an impending clash of civilisations which he presented in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1993. It is true that the wars in the former Yugoslavia followed along the cultural boundaries between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires and developed into wars between Orthodoxy and Catholicism and between both of these and Islam. However, they were first and foremost the result of Serb nationalism combined with an obstinate desire among Communist bigwigs to hold onto the power, whatever the cost. In Bosnia, the Muslims stand for a secular, civilised outlook while the Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs have behaved like autistic nationalists and have shown a narrow-mindedness and intolerance comparable with the worst exponents of Islamic fundamentalism.

Huntington identifies Europe by its Latin and its Protestant parts. Thus, he has not only become entangled in the coordinates of East and West, but also contradicts his own arguments put forward as late as 1991 in an article with the title "Religion and the third wave".

Then, just two years before he presented his theories on the inevitable clash of civilisations, Huntington asserted that "the argument that some cultures are a permanent obstacle to developments in one direction or another must be met with a certain degree of scepticism . . . Every larger cultural grouping, even Confucianism, contains certain elements that are compatible with democracy just as Protestantism and Catholicism both contain elements that are clearly undemocratic". Hence Huntington has delivered the best arguments against his own theories himself. Cultures, in similarity with existing confessions of faith, are in a constant state of change. Many cultural elements remain constant, others change over the lifetime of just one or two generations. Economic development is a prime factor in this process of change. In the 1950s, the Spanish culture was defined as being traditionally-minded, authoritarian, hierarchic and religiously orientated. Today Spain is no longer described in these terms.

Europe's identity lies in its diversity and the distinctiveness of its individual cultures. Throughout history both Byzantium and Islam have left their mark on Europe which, today, through increased immigration and the "native" Muslim population in the Balkans, has a greater number of Muslim inhabitants than Protestant Northerners. In the west and the north Europe's boundaries have been determined by geography, while those in the east and south have been constantly displaced as a result of conquests. Today, as it was earlier, Europe's easternmost border is fluid. "The West, there it is, the West", wrote Isaak Babel in his diary in 1920 when he came to the border town of Brody, which was still being fought over by the Poles and the Bolsheviks. As he later approached Lvov (the Habsburg Lemberg and today's Ukrainian Lviv), he noted that

he had caught a breath of European air which came with the west wind. In the centre of Lviv, the baroque facades – although dilapidated – are still Austrian in style and reminiscent of Vienna or Graz although they are but illusions of a dead past.

Czernowitz, which until 1918 was the capital of the Austrian crown-land Bukovina, thereafter Romanian and after 1945 a part of the Soviet Union, was the town where, among others, Martin Buber and Paul Celan grew up. During the Austrian era the intellectual ambience of this town was so powerful that, to quote the historian Eric Hobsbawm, entire faculties could be filled by people born in Czernowitz. Before the outbreak of World War I there were five German-language newspapers and the better cafés were stocked with hundreds of different newspapers and journals in various languages. At the university, classes were taught and exams were conducted in German, with the exception of the Faculty of Theology, which used Romanian, Ukrainian and liturgical Slavonic. Since then, Czernowitz has undergone a drastic transformation from a cosmopolitan European outpost in the East to the provincial Ukrainian town of Tjernivtsi.

With every eastward enlargement the issue will arise once again of where the borders of the European Union lie. The only thing that is clear is that the borders of today are not for ever, and those of tomorrow will be determined on the basis of respect for fundamental democratic principles. A country that wants to be regarded as European must have a Government founded on a Parliament which has been elected in free elections with general suffrage, which respects the freedom of expression and freedom of the press, offers protection to its national minorities and fulfils the obligations of international law.

Pope John Paul II frequently talks of a Europe with two lungs. The Europe of today could also be described as two communicating vessels. Integration can spread from West to East but fragmentation can also spread in the opposite direction. Stability in Western Europe also depends on stability in Central and Eastern Europe. The Balkans too must become Europeanised if we want to safeguard Europe from Balkanisation.

Neither can we erase Russia or other states with roots in the former Soviet Empire, such as Ukraine, once and for all from the definition of Europe. Even if the "zapadniki" – "the westernizers" – were to win the age-old battle against the Slavophiles who emphasise Russia's distinctive character and isolation, Russia would not automatically receive an admission ticket into the EU. Relations between the European Union and a democratic Russia with a market economy would sooner be comparable with those that prevailed between Prussia and Austria in the German Confederation, or Austria and Hungary during the dual monarchy. Two great powers were one too many for these political constructions to be sustainable. In the same way, Russia is and remains too large and too much *sui generis* for the EU. A democratic Russia would admittedly be counted as European, but the ultimate objective must be to achieve a relationship between Russia and the EU similar to that which currently exists between the EU and the USA.

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