

Central Europe 1950-2000

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CENTRAL EUROPE is a political term. She who says 'Central Europe' maps a particular piece of territory, with a particular set of human collectives and institutions, and sets it apart from other possible mappings. Saying 'Central Europe' is a way of making place out of space, a way of forging a certain collective self and charging that political self with political power. Since political discourse feeds upon other kinds of discourse, saying 'Central Europe' is a political act regardless of what kind of discourse it happens within. When 'Central Europe' is used as a demarcation on a road-map or as a statistical point of reference, one of its effects is the political one of confirming a world view where Central Europe exists and has certain functions, at the same time confirming that other and rivalling selves which present themselves under different names have a weaker claim to relevance than has Central Europe. Central Europe is as it were spoken into existence and maintained as a relevant political term by dint of its continuing use, this text being an example of how Central Europe is continuously used, contested, negotiated and ultimately confirmed in one of its usages or changed in terms of its references.

In this paper, I will ask three questions. First, what is the history of the term? Secondly, what makes its use possible? Thirdly, how does it function politically, what empowers it?

The history of the term

I want to address the history of the term Central Europe for two reasons. The first reason is to demonstrate that the term has meant different things at different times, depending among other things upon which other terms it functioned in relation to. If it has meant different things at different times, having as its reference points different human collectives, different spaces and different political practices, there is every reason to believe that its referents may change again. In short, there is no one Central Europe, historically or contemporarily, but many Central Europés, and they all compete for political importance. The second reason for addressing the history of the term is that past usages echo within present usages, in the sense that the term Central Europe, like any other term, is not simply a technical one, but carries with it a certain political baggage, which is the weight of its own history.

Although one may trace the debate as to the essence of the term 'Central Europe' back to the first usages of the term 'Europe' and its relatives (e.g. Wolff 1994), the first concerted claims to occupying it seem to emanate from the project for a protectionist economic zone drawn up by the German political economist Friedrich List (1904 [1841]), with inspiration from Fichte (1979 [1800]). The claim of these authors was that Germany was placed in the middle or centre of Europe, and so should play a central role in its economic and hence political affairs. In spatial terms, List's *Mitteleuropa* includes places like Belgium. The political campaign for a *Mitteleuropa* received a boost when Germans discussed in which direction to expand on the eve of the First World War, with a programme for *Mittelafrika* contesting the one of *Mitteleuropa*. The central plea for the importance of *Mitteleuropa* came from Friedrich Naumann (1915). It is highly apposite to our discussions that, historically, there has not always been hard and fast lines between the German term *Mitteleuropa* and the English term Central Europe. For example, recent writings on Central Europe such as Mutton (1961, vii) are economic in tone, and include Belgium.

I mention this since, at the turn of the century, the term Central Europe seems also to have been used about the Habsburg empire or constellations of territory and human collectives resembling the Habsburg empire. Looking back at the struggle of these two projects,

we tend to call them *Mittleuropa* and Central Europe, respectively, but that is anachronistic. At the time, this demarcation was not clear. This is a rather obvious point, since the struggle played itself out overwhelmingly in languages other than English, and so the English term could not of course have been used very often. Since the English term 'Central Europe' is often propelled back in time and applied to these debates, however, this may nonetheless be a point worth making.

After the Second World War, the term Central Europe was used by Hungarian and Polish intellectuals such as Czesław Miłosz as a cultural term. The central point about this usage is that it took place within the overall discourse of the Cold War, with its political two-camp division of Europe and the world into the camp of socialism and the camp of capitalism. In this setting, the Central European discourse acted as countermove to these stories of the politically constituted selves of socialism and capitalism. Pointing to historical periods previous to the Cold War, the term Central Europe was a reminder that other ways of mapping the world did exist. As already noted, this usage of Central Europe coexisted with a usage like that of Mutton's, of Central Europe as an economic, German-centered project.

Around 1980, with the setting being one coloured by the emergence of the Solidarity movement in Poland, there was a marked re-invigoration of the cultural use of the term Central Europe. The best known example of this usage is the essay by Milan Kundera, originally written for a Swedish journal and called 'A Kidnapped West' and published with this title in Britain, but also by *The New York Review of Books* in the US, as 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' (1984). Kundera wrote in the following vein: 'Russia is not just as one more European power but as a singular civilization, an *other* civilization [...] totalitarian Russian civilization is the radical negation of the modern West...'. Kundera had then already written extensively on the topic, as had a number of other Czech, Hungarian and Polish artists and intellectuals (see Neumann 1998, chapter five, for an extensive overview). As already mentioned, it is a point of no mean interest that these texts were often made available to a European-wide interest in English, as well as in other languages; this discourse on Central Europe was definitely a trans-national and indeed European- and Atlantic-wide one.

In the 1980s, however, we can also trace the resuscitation of the other major usage in this century, namely that of Central Europe as a German-centered economic and political project. It was only during the 1980s that two different usages were stabilised to denote these two different projects: Central Europe for the cultural discourse emanating from The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary etc, *Mittleuropa* for the economic-political discourse emanating from Germany.

With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central European discourse spread from being mainly the preserve of artists and intellectuals, who were self-proclaimed Central Europeans, to also involving West European intellectuals and Central European politicians (who, by the way, were themselves often also artists and intellectuals). It also changed from being an overtly cultural discourse (and only covertly a political one), to becoming overtly political, in the sense that specific political ends for 'Central Europe' began to be named. Two examples will suffice. First, a quote from Timothy Garton Ash, submitting itself as an appeal to the EC's Maastricht summit:

Historically and culturally, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia belong to Europe. A Europe which contains Crete but not Bohemia, Lisbon but not Warsaw, is historical nonsense. [...] It makes plain, practical sense to start [the expansion of the EU/I.N.] with those that are nearest, and work out to those which are farthest. Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia are nearest not only geographically, historically, and culturally, but also in the progress they have already made on the road to democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy. (Ash, Moites & Moisi 1991,19)

In January 1990, Vaclav Havel had voiced the idea that Central Europe was a cultural concept in search of realisation when he told the Polish Sejm that

there is before us the real historic chance to fill with something meaningful the great political vacuum that appeared in Central Europe after the break-up of the Habsburg Empire. We have the chance to transfer Central Europe from a phenomenon that has so far been historical and spiritual into a political phenomenon. We have the chance to take a string of European countries that until recently were colonised by the Soviets and that today are attempting the kind of friendship with the nations of the Soviet Union which would be founded on equal rights, and transform them into a definite special body, which would approach Western Europe not as a poor dissident or a helpless, searching amnestied prisoner, but as someone who has something to offer... (Havel 1990, 561).

This discourse was a very productive one, in the sense that the term 'Central Europe' was very soon adopted also by Western politicians. In record time, the idea that Central Europe had a self-evident place at the head of the queue for EU and NATO memberships had been established. This turn in the debate was so swift and decisive that it was very soon suppressed that only a few years before the three countries The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary had been with equal self-evidence known as parts of 'Eastern Europe'. As this success played itself out, one could see a wild goose-chase all over the former Eastern Europe, and also in certain parts of the former Soviet Union, for having one's country subsumed under the term 'Central Europe'.

Whereas one reason for this goose-chase was a perceived need to partake of the success of the Central European enterprise of the 1980s, there was also an additional reason. As pointed out by Maria Todorova, after 1990, 'Central Europe' was no longer presenting itself simply as being different from Russia, but also as being different from that other half of the old 'Eastern Europe', namely the Balkans. The Balkans has become a new 'other' to Central Europe, 'sometimes alongside with, sometimes indistinguishable from' Russia (Todorova 1997, 160). She produces as particularly convincing discursive evidence for this a quote from the debate about the pacing of NATO enlargement, where it was argued that NATO

cannot suddenly open its doors to anyone at all [...] the contiguous and stable Central European belt borders both on the traditionally agitated Balkans and the great Eurasian area, where democracy and market economics are only slowly and painfully breaking away toward their fulfillment. In short, it is a key area for European security. (Vaclav Havel in *New York Times*, 17 October 1993, p. E17, quoted in Todorova 1997, 156).

One Balkan response to this othering was to fight the exclusion from Central Europe by trying to be included in it, that is by fielding itself as an alternative Central Europe.

Another significant development of the 1990s was that the debate about *Mittleuropa* became a central part of ongoing German negotiations about the place and identity of Germany in its European setting (Staun 1998). The move of the capital from the *Bundesdorf Bonn* back to Berlin is often presented as the epitome of this process, and

so a quote from one of Helmut Kohl's Berlin speeches may be used as an example:

In Berlin kreuzen sich die Wege vom Norden in den Süden, vom Westen in den Osten Europas. Wir Deutsche haben mehr Nachbarn als jedes andere europäische Land. Die geographische Mittellage Deutschlands hat zur Folge, daß es uns nicht gleichgültig sein kann, was um uns herum geschieht. (Kohl, 13 March quoted in Staun 1998, 37)

At present, then, representations of 'Central Europe' take on three major forms. First, there is the politically successful one which denotes the three countries The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary as Central European and hence countries accepted into NATO and at the head of the line for EU membership. We have here a self-representation which has been recognised by Western Europe. Secondly, there is a politically aspiring representation of Central Europe which is entertained by the belt of countries from Estonia in the north to Bulgaria in the south which insists that Central Europe does not only include the three countries mentioned, but also something more, and most particularly the country where this representation is being forged, be that Slovenia, Romania or somewhere else. We have here a self-representation which is usually not recognised by Czechs, Poles and Hungarians, and only variously so by Western Europeans. One may say that negotiations over this representation are intense. Thirdly, there is a politically successful representation of Central Europe known as *Mittleuropa*, centered on Germany and usually not seen as comprising other spaces. This is a self-representation which is variously, and usually grudgingly, recognised in all other European countries, and thus it is largely a politically successful one.

What makes the representation of Central Europe possible ?

Representations do not simply exist. They pop up for a reason, they are maintained for a reason, and they are challenged for a reason. Since 'central' is an epithet qualifying 'Europe', one would think that, in order to be effective, any representation of Central Europe should be subsumable under the broader category of Europe. In order to be credible and effective, discourse on Central Europe must be compatible with the discourse on Europe at large. This should mean

that discourse on Europe presents a universe on which discourse on Central Europe not only can, but must draw. To be more specific, in order to be convincing, representations of central Europe must be in concordance with the broader representations of Europe. Representations of Central Europe are constrained geographically by representations of Europe, inasmuch as the centrality of central Europe is represented geographically. It is of course hard to represent oneself as geographically 'central' if one is located at the extreme periphery of that entity which one wants to be central in relation to. If such a move should be attempted, the centrality claimed has to be of another sort than geographical, for example cultural. Thus, Boston may be 'central' to American literature, although geographically it is located close to the country's extreme East.

For two shorthand examples, I refer to the Polish debate on civic-military relations and the Estonian debate on minority policy. In Poland, the prestige of the military has traditionally been high. This has probably to do with factors such as the importance of the traditional warfighting *szlachta* (nobility) as a nation-bearing element in the nineteenth century and the role of J. Piłsudski in the interwar period. When president Walesa's political base crumbled, it was, therefore, not surprising to see him look to the military for support (that this happened despite Solidarity's experiences with the imposition of martial law only adds to the strength of this argument). One of Walesa's lines was to play down the need for clear-cut civil control of the military. When the opposition was nevertheless rather efficient in fighting this gambit, it was partially because they could refer to the existence of a European 'standard' where civil-military relations were concerned, and the need for Poland to adhere to that standard in order to be treated as *beitrittsfähig* by the EU, and also by NATO. Thus, Polish internalisations of what was represented as European 'standards' played a role, perhaps a decisive role, in defeating a ploy which had the strength of growing out of national traditions.

In Estonia, discourse about Russians in the late 1980s and early 1990s had a heavily racist strand. Estonians at home and abroad would repeatedly refer in conversation to how Russian women had been raped by Mongols and Tatars for centuries and so were 'contaminated' by 'an Asiatic gene pool', etc. At present, this strand has not necessarily disappeared, but it has at least been forced further underground. How did this happen? One major reason was the

existence of a European standard of discourse where such views were deemed to be impermissible. The cultural hegemony of a European standard against racist discourse (which is no less a standard for not being always adhered to) worked in the direction of changing this particular strand of Estonian politics. As witnessed by the case of Estonian citizenship laws, this is not to say that the European standard for minority policy as it is upheld by the EU, the OSCE etc is being fully adhered to. The point, however, is that the political discourse of one applicant state was partly changed. A further point may be that, by not adhering fully to the European standard in question, Estonia's chances of integration into the EU have probably been hampered. Be that as it may, the two examples should demonstrate that overall European discourse has certain boundaries for what goes and what does not, and that a country, in order to be recognised as European (and that includes Central European), has to represent itself according to the means available within those boundaries.

But this also means that it is no coincidence that Central Europe is represented as it is, and recognised as it is. Saying 'Central Europe' is an appeal to Europe at large for being recognised as part of the European self, on the terms in which that European self represents itself. We have here, therefore, a case of isomorphism, whereby discourse on Central Europe replays certain parts of discourse on Europe.

Having investigated the noun in the term Central Europe, I now turn to the adjective 'central'. In order to tell a credible story of yourself as 'Central Europe', you have to pass yourself off as central in one or more ways. Central America does this by having a geographical position between North America and Latin America, The Central African Republic seems to be doing it by an appeal to geography as well, and Central Asia does it mainly by being politically placed between the five major historical empires in Asia.

Is the Central European representation put forward by Czechs, Hungarians and Poles warranted in placing Central Europe in the centre of Europe? Geographically, it depends of course on where one draws the boundary to the East. Interestingly, in order to be centrally placed geographically, Central Europeans would have to follow Peter the Great and his geographer Tatischev's lead and draw the boundary at the Urals, thus including a 'European' part of Russia (see Neumann 1998, chapter three). In political terms, however, this is exactly

what a number of advocates of Central Europe want to avoid; they want Russia to be outside of Central Europe altogether.

Kundera *et al.* argue that Central Europe is central to Europe in a cultural sense or, more specifically, that it was so around the turn of the century, and that Europe therefore cannot be culturally whole without including Central Europe. This may or may not be so, but the issue of wholeness does not rest on the metaphor of centrality. The same plea has been made by Norman Davies, when he refers to Poland in a book title as being the 'Heart of Europe' (1984). The metaphor here is an organic one, which underwrites the wholeness of a European organism, but which at the same time gainsays the metaphor of centrality: wherever the heart is, at least where the human species is concerned, it is not placed in the spatial centre of the body.

Kundera also insists that the powder tower at Václavské Náměstí is the dead centre of Europe, because east-west and north-south trading routes ostensibly crossed there at some historical point. István Bibó and Jenő Szűcz have made similar claims on grounds of historical sociology. These are claims for inscribing specific practices at specific points in time with contemporary relevance. It is hardly the case that Central Europe is central to European cultural and economic life overall today, and so presenting it as being so on historical grounds necessarily includes a lot of bracketing of other historical experiences.

The one discourse where this representation of Central Europe has almost consistently been held to be central, is the geopolitical one. Bismarck and Haushofer both pointed to Bohemia as being the centre of Europe. During the Cold War, military strategists placed the central flank here. Ironically, then, this representation of Central Europe can be said to be central in one sense only, namely in a strategic-military sense, and then only as long as the Soviet Union, Russia or any other political entity occupying an overlapping space is said to be Western Europe's enemy, so that there can be a space in which a centre can be lodged, and over which the two parties can contend. Thus, this representation of Central Europe seems to depend on a state of affairs which apparently is not wanted by a number of the people who sustain it.

One must then ask how central to Europe the two other representations of Central Europe are. The one presented by countries from Estonia in the north to Bulgaria in the south run into a number

of the same problems as does the one presented by Czechs, Hungarians and Poles, and also into the additional problem that discursively, the latter three are trying their best to hog this space for themselves.

The presentation of Germany as central to Europe is, however, very hard to challenge. Along an east-west as well as a north-south axis, Germany does indeed occupy a central space or *Mittellage*. Germany is Europe's largest economy and thus central to European economy overall, and it is the central state in a general political sense as well. Culturally, it is less central, but since in the cultural sphere the decentering of Europe has proceeded further than in any other sphere, this may not be so relevant. Crucially, Germany is recognised as central by a welter of other European state and non-state actors, however grudgingly. *Mittleuropa*, then, is central to Europe in a whole number of ways in which Central Europe is not.

How do the representations of Central Europe function politically ?

Having drawn up a rough sketch of representations of 'Central Europe', and having specified the discursive space in which Central Europe is negotiated, I now turn to the question of empowerment. Which are the overall political patterns traced by these representation ?

The currently dominating representation of Central Europe as consisting of The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary was an appeal issued by Central European artists and intellectuals to the West during the Cold War. It carried a double message: First, it argued that Central Europe was a self different from the remaining unity of the Soviet Bloc as it was normally considered. That is, Russia was othered as something not only different, but qualitatively different from Central Europe. In the negotiations over the central European self, some held that it only differed from the Soviet Union, but not from tsarist and capitalist Russia; and some argued that it was merely different, but not wholly different, from the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the dominant representation which emerged out of these struggles was that Central Europe was wholly different from Russia. Secondly,

it was argued that Central Europe was part of the European self, and a part without which the European self could not be whole.

Since this representation has played a role in furthering Czech, Hungarian and Polish NATO and EU applications, in an institutional sense—and that is a crucial sense in a situation where Europe becomes ever more tightly institutionalised—this representation is a political success story. Why did it succeed? One reason is that it spoke to fears of Russia which are part of the overall discourse on Europe. Another is that the historical argument that these countries were sold down the river (not Mississippi though, but perhaps the Danube?) at Yalta, and that Yalta should be overcome now that the order to which it gave rise has fallen, had a certain appeal. Yet another is that the institutions of NATO and the EU could do with some new members to demonstrate their relevance in the post-Cold War circumstances. Obviously, the representation was also convincing in the sense that transition to the overall European political and economic models of democracy and capitalism could convincingly be represented as being quicker here than elsewhere; the representation succeeded in the terms of its own choice (see Neumann 1998a).

It seems, however, that this vastly successful Czech, Hungarian and Polish representation of Central Europe, which came to the fore in European politics in the 1980s, is about to be hoisted on its own petard. What suggests this is, first, the very success of the undertaking of becoming an institutionalised part of the European self and second, the way in which this success lays the discursive space of central Europe open to the two other representations which are currently in circulation.

First, the success. The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary have become fully fledged members of NATO with the geopolitical implications of this being that they have become members of the Atlantic community. Although membership in the EU seems unrealistic before 2006 at the earliest, these three countries are widely believed to be on their way in. In terms of political and economic integration, these three countries are drawing closer to previous members of the EU by the month. All this seems to suggest that the representation of these three countries as a part of Europe without which Europe cannot be whole has actually been recognised by West European countries. This bond, furthermore, has been institutionalised.

There are two ways of describing this in terms of geographical metaphors like 'west' and 'central'. One is to say that NATO and the EU will now consist of Western and Central Europe, and not only Western Europe as before. However, what packed the power into this representation of The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland as 'Central Europe' was among other things its temporary cutting off from Western Europe. With integration into Western European structures, one of the predicaments on which this whole representation was predicated can therefore be seen to disappear. Instead of saying that Central Europe joins Western Europe, it would therefore make more sense to say that these three countries are being integrated into Western Europe.

Another reason why this may be a more helpful way of describing matters, is the existence of the two other representations of Central Europe—German *Mittleuropa* and the belt of states from Estonia to Bulgaria. With The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland ensconced in Western Europe, we can already witness attempts by the latter to hog the Central European space left by those who have decamped for the West. Indeed, in terms of the only sense in which these three countries could be said to be central to Europe, namely in the geopolitical one, they cease to be central and begin to be part of the West from the moment NATO membership takes effect. The central geopolitical space between Russia and NATO—to the extent that it can be said to exist at all as a contested area—will be taken up by the three Baltic states, Ukraine and others. This will inevitably strengthen the claim of these countries to make up Central Europe, and it will strengthen it in the very terms formulated by Czechs, Hungarians and Poles during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, there is every reason to believe that Germany's *Mittellage* will confer on it a role as central—or perhaps even more central—than what one sees at the present juncture.

Conclusion

For these reasons, Central Europe seems to be moving away from Prague, Warsaw and Budapest, in the direction of Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius and Kiev on the one hand, and in the direction of Berlin on the other. Of course, the representation of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary as 'Central Europe' may continue to co-exist with a representation of these countries as Western European ones, in the same way that the five Nordic countries manage to be both Northern European and Western European at the same time. Which identity comes to the fore is, after all, contextual. However, with two other representations pitching for the same ground, there may not be more political mileage to be had out of the representation of central Europe for the elites of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, and so this particular representation seems destined to lead a rather shadowy political life compared to the other two. This move from 'Central' to 'Western' was, however, ostensibly what the Czech, Polish and Hungarian artists and intellectuals who resuscitated the term twenty years ago ultimately wanted. Now that it is happening, it confers on the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland the onerous task—known for a long time by other peripheral states in Western Europe such as the one I know best—of proving to be central in some specific issue area or other. It is nice not to be too central, particularly not to be too central in a strategic military sense. It is not nice, however, to be a forgotten country on the periphery of Europe. As members of NATO and EU, these three countries will still have to take the many small steps that will place them centrally in all those flows which make up European politics. In this, they may take Finland's EU record as an example of how well it is possible to navigate, and Sweden's as an example of how easily chances are missed. In terms of identity politics, then, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland cannot afford to rest on their Central European laurels, but must start forging other central European roles for themselves.

OSLO

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