

Introduction to Central Europe: What Does it Mean in the 21st Century?

The end of a fateful division of Europe by the “Iron Curtain”, which passed right through its middle for forty years also brought a revival of interest in, and discussion about, the phenomenon of Central Europe.

When we get on a train, e.g. in Lvov, and we travel via Krakow, Brno, Bratislava and Győr to Zagreb, via Budapest to Brasov or via Vienna and Graz to Ljubljana, the view out the window, of railway stations, towers of churches or buildings of theaters and/or other representative institutions, will always remind us of being in the same cultural-historical area. The common spirit of this area is still alive in spite of the last one hundred years of wars and revolutions, defined by hectic construction and the repeated elimination not only of political regimes, but also of whole state formations.

The phenomenon of Central Europe, characterized by more than just its location in the middle of the *Old Continent*, is evident at least from the times when the Habsburg monarchy was constituted in this area. Some historians place the origin of classical central european state formations to the time of the Czech Kingdom – under the reign of Charles IV, the Hungarian Kingdom of Matthias Corvinus, or the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom of the Jagiellonians. Czechs and Slovaks would probably appreciate it if the Great Moravian Empire was also listed in this enumeration.

From a geopolitical point of view, Central Europe disintegrated with the end of Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Treaty of Versailles made it a part of the so called “Sanitary Cordon”, which was supposed to protect, and be protected by the winners of World War I and, at the same time, to separate two potentially dangerous powers – Germany and Russia. As it came out twenty years later, this cordon, or rather buffer, did not save anyone, nor did the powers thoroughly defend it.

The second blow, even more fatal than Versailles, was delivered to Central Europe by the Yalta agreement, which divided Europe between Stalin and others.

The dismantling of Central Europe was completed by the establishment of economic and military-political blocks: NATO, the Warsaw pact, The Council for Mutual Economic Help (RVHP), etc.

The year 1989 brought a new situation. According to Grendel (1997), desire and nostalgia for the West find their expression in the revival of the idea of

Central Europe. In this sense, Central Europe lost its topical relevance after 1989 and as integration of Western Europe in this area proceeds, Central Europe will be ever less necessary until we all forget about it. Grendel also argues that the concept of Central Europe, which was productive in the period of the “Cold War” before 1989, can function counterproductively, as it can slow down or even question the integration of this region into European structures.

It is also evident that a number of authors found Central Europe to be an illusion or ghetto, unnecessarily restricting an exchange of ideas across the whole Europe. This attitude results in the absence of a generally accepted definition of the phenomenon of Central Europe.

On the other hand, the immediate post-1989 period is also characterized by a revival of different regional international associations like the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), Central European Initiative (CEI), Pentagonal and/or Visegrad Four Group.

From a sustainability point of view, the Central European region (except for Austria) represents – as far as the devastation of the environment and measures of inefficiency of utilizing natural resources are concerned – one of the most negative examples on the map of the present world.

Contrarily, Central Europe represents certain values, both environmental and cultural, thanks to which orientation towards a more sustainable way of existence is well-founded and can be potentially successful in this region.

The unique life experience of the central european people interpreted in a specific “central european” manner is, and always will be, interesting for the entire world community.

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