

# What Are the Challenges of Central Europe?

Miloslav Lapka, Jan Vávra, Eva Cudlínová

## 1. Introduction: Emerging of the question

The roots of this book can be traced to the year 2011. In that year, the first interdisciplinary conference titled *Our Common Present* (to paraphrase Brundtland's *Our Common Future* in which the concept of sustainable development was introduced) was organized at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.<sup>1</sup> The event was subtitled *Global Challenges for Cultural and Social Ecology* and the conference speeches dealt mostly with the human-environment relationship from the perspective of social sciences. Year later, the conference was co-organized by the Faculty of Economics, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice and the Faculty of Education, University Hradec Králové. The main topic remained the same, a reflection of the human-environment relationship by the social sciences, the subtitle of the conference was *Changing Society?* Both years of the conference were followed by the publication of a special journal issue or collective monograph based on the conference papers or collected for that occasion.

When we started to prepare for the third conference year with another co-organizer, Charles University Environment Center,<sup>2</sup> we felt that we would like to broaden the scope of the event and we came up with the idea of a geographic marking of Central Europe and a conference subtitle of *Current Challenges of Central Europe*. We immediately realized that the definition of Central Europe (CE) is not an easy one. It is generally agreed that this region covers Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary. Sometimes Slovenia, Croatia, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland, or some regions of Italy and Ukraine, are also considered as being part of CE. Which states belong to CE relies heavily on the chosen criteria. Geographical, cultural, political or economic viewpoints will provide different maps of CE. The dynamic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have changed the maps of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Here we must remember Zdenka Sokolíčková, member of Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, who has been co-organizer of the conference since the beginning in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jana Dlouhá from Charles University Environment Center was co-organizer of the 2013 conference.

region several times and for many decades after WWII the label CE seemed to lose its meaning, the political and economic division of the region on East – West antagonistic systems was too strict. However, after 1989 the situation changed and since the EU enlargement in 2004 there is a potential for the future constitution of regional identity. Some of the historical layers of hundreds of years of living in the same neighborhood or together are very strong and show us that there are many commonalities. Of course, there are many differences as well, and from a wider perspective the division into Western Europe and Central Eastern Europe (CEE) still seems to make more sense. The biggest attention of this book is paid to the Eastern part of Central Europe, or the Western part of Central Eastern Europe, i.e. to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, together known as the Visegrad Group (V4).

Knowing some of the commonalities and specifics of the region, we asked ourselves, as well as the conference speakers, one question: “What are the main current challenges of Central Europe?” After listening to the conference presentations and discussions, and reading the book chapters, some key topics have appeared:

1. Modern education in Central Europe.
2. Contemporary interdisciplinary problems combined with insufficient partial approach of relevant institutions.
3. Lack of trust towards traditional institutions and their representatives.

An appropriate education, real support of interdisciplinarity, and a restoration of trust in institutions are, of course, the challenges of many other regions, not only Central Europe. However, these problems challenge the central european identity. The changes of environment – social, economic, ecological – are very fast. Additionally, these changes take place in a specific time, when the enthusiasm of the early 1990s disappeared and many people lack interest in social problems or show a high level of skepticism. In these times, a re-thinking of our problems and identity as a region seems to be more important now than in other periods.

## **2. Practical answers**

It would probably be too ambitious if we were to state that all of the chapters in this book deal particularly with the most urgent problems of the region; however, we can say that while writing about some specific case studies or parts of the problem, the authors have pointed to some of the important challenges. Most of these trends are global and this book aims to illustrate their central european expression. The chapters in this book deal with such global challenges as climate change, energy demand and low carbon transition, loss of biodiversity, food production, multiculturalism, the transformation of political systems, and specific local and global reactions to financial

crisis and economic recession. As we mentioned above, the principles of the challenges are global, but their expression and the social responses to them are regionally specific. We tried to arrange the chapters in such an order that the book starts with theoretical studies dealing with the general traits of the central european cultures or political systems and continues with study covering more central european states, respectively with the local one or two state case studies of responses to global challenges.

The brief introduction is followed by the short introductory essay *Introduction to Central Europe: What Does It Mean in the 21st Century?* written by Mikuláš Huba, a Slovak geographer and politician. The succeeding chapter, *What Are the Challenges of Central Europe?* (this one) authored by the book editors Miloslav Lapka, Jan Vávra, and Eva Cudlínová is an attempt to sketch the contextual framework of the challenges of CE presented in the book. Czech researcher Zdenka Sokolíčková contributed with the study *Transcultural Communication in the Central European Region: Freedom, Equality and Ties with the Natural Environment* focused on a cultural and philosophical understanding of the central european area. The next chapter, written by Czech and Czech-New Zealand researchers Jana Dlouhá and Andrew Barton, titled *Examining the Transition Toward Sustainability in Higher Education in Central Europe* focuses on the changes in education in various central european states. Polish researcher Anna Kalinowska's chapter *Biodiversity Loss and Public Opinion: What Is the Situation in Central Europe?* discusses the regional political and public reactions to the loss of biodiversity. Czechoslovak group of researchers consisting of Barbora Duží, Attila Tóth, Mária Bihuňová, and Robert Stojanov participated in the chapter *Challenges of Urban Agriculture: Highlights on the Czech and Slovak Republic Specifics* focusing on the history and trends of urban agriculture in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The next text, written by Czech sociologists and economists Jan Vávra, Eva Cudlínová and Miloslav Lapka is titled *Green Growth from the Viewpoint of the Czech Republic*. As the title suggests, the chapter introduces the concept of green growth and focuses on its implementation in the country. The next chapter is written by Czech-based Slovak project manager and local activist Katarína Zuntychová. It is labelled *Complementary Currencies: The Hungarian Example* and focused on the case of the local currency Kékfrank in Sopron. *Some Additions to Sustainable Development in the Visegrad Countries, Especially in Hungary* is name of the last chapter, authored by Hungarian lawyer and economist Tibor László Csegődi. His text deals with energy-related issues in Hungary, public opinion, and the role of local governments.

Does CE have its own specifics? Based on the chapters presented in this book, it looks like CE has no additional problem which should be added to the world list of existing problems. From an economic and environmental point of view we are a part of the globalized world, the same situation occurs

in terms of scientific concepts and approaches. The economy, biosphere, and science are global systems of which we are a part. What could be specific here are the historical and cultural experiences with the Cold War, with a divided Europe, and with the gap between communist ideology and reality. The speed of transition of post-communist countries into more or less liberal economies is fascinating. In less than a quarter of century it is hard to find the differences between West Europe and CE in terms of the offer of goods in supermarkets and hypermarkets, for example.<sup>3</sup>

The differences lie deeper, and the lack of trust towards traditional institutions and their representatives is one of the good examples of the problem with identity. CE is able to be a part of the global world, with all of its advantages and failures, and is open to the global economy and technologies. On the other hand, the cultural and social roots of national identity are diminished. From this point of view, we can see the demands of modern education in CE, the demands on an interdisciplinary approach instead of a blinded sectorial problem solution, the demands for real sustainability and alternatives as a way to respond to global challenges, and also a way of seeking a national identity. With full respect to the limited and specific sample of speakers and audience members at our conference, we can see how rapid the adaptation of CE to the global economic and environmental challenges are, and the delay in terms of cultural adaptation. “The most important internal differentiation is that between national and international patterns on the one hand and subcultures or sociocultural segments on the other” (Steward, 1972, p. 64).

### **3. Central Europe as a subject of interest**

The following brief overview has no ambition to map all of the relevant authors and actions related to our topic and is based more on a selection of the typical characteristics of the central european topic. The problem of CE is frequently posed as a geographical and ecological entity in specific studies concerning landscape changes (Bičík & Jeleček, 2009), and environmental policies (Turnock, 2001). For the focus of our conference, the domain of the social sciences is the most important. In fact, there is no global topic which will be not covered by some article analyzing this problem from the central european point of view.

There exist two leading historical journals dedicated to the problems of CE, near to the topic of our conference: *Central European History* and *East Central Europe*. We consider it important to show some examples of the discourse of

---

<sup>3</sup> The Czech Republic has the 4<sup>th</sup> most compact net of hypermarkets in Europe, 26 hypermarkets per 1 million people (Idnes.cz, 2012).

CE, often generated from the western part of Europe and the USA. We tried to find those journals, books and conferences which are close to our approach.

### 3.1. Journals

*Central European History* is a journal published for the Central European History Society by Cambridge University Press. According to the scope of the journal, it “offers articles, review essays, and book reviews that range widely through the history of Germany, Austria, and other German-speaking regions of Central Europe from the medieval era to the present. All topics and approaches to history are welcome, whether cultural, social, political, diplomatic, intellectual, economic, and military history, as well as historiography and methodology. Contributions that treat new fields, such as post-1945 and post-1989 history [...] are especially desired. The journal thus aims to be the primary venue for scholarly exchange and debate among scholars of the history of Central Europe” (*Central European History*, 2014). Apart from the definition of CE as German-speaking regions, the location of members of the editorial board is also very interesting: 15 from US universities; Canadian, German and Swiss institutions are represented by one member each. Additionally, it is published by UK publishing.

The journal *East Central Europe* is according to the scope, “a peer-reviewed journal of social sciences and humanities with a focus on the region between the Baltic and the Adriatic. It aims to stimulate the dialogue and exchange between scholarship produced in and on East-Central Europe and other area study traditions, in a global context” (*East Central Europe*, 2013). This journal is open, as it is in its proclamation, to all authors and, in fact, to all thematic focuses, written in English.

CE also finds its space in other journals. An example could be the article by Frank Schimmelfennig and Arista Maria Cirtautas in the *Europe-Asia Studies* journal (Schimmelfennig & Cirtautas, 2010).

### 3.2. Conferences

The topic of CE is often connected with the name of the aforementioned Frank Schimmelfennig. He edited a book of essays (with Ulrich Sedelmeier) collected from a group of scholars with firsthand research experience in the new member-states of Central and Eastern Europe. The book of essays is framed by opening and concluding chapters by editors that outline several aspects of preparation for accession. This book opened the theme of Europeanization for the East and Central Europe (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

The Annual Conference: Central Europe Program was held in Vienna in July 2014. Achievements of 124 projects implemented in the past seven years were presented and discussed among project partners, policy makers and other stakeholders from all over central Europe seeking for the priori-

ties in this region. Central Europe expert Jacques Rupnik from Sciences Po University in Paris held the keynote speech titled “Does central Europe still exist? Strengths and limitations of its cooperation” there (*Cooperation in Central Europe*, 2014).

### **3.3. Books**

There are also books related to the topics of CE, similar to this volume: for example Stark’s and Bruszt’s (1988) book is dedicated to the problem of choice between democratization and marketization.

Similar to our topic is the Cox’s and Mason’s book, dealing with the problem of social and economic globalization in the wider region of CE. Based on case-studies from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, they discuss the impact of economic changes on new forms of institutional arrangements, social patterns, and organizations (Cox & Mason, 1999). Of course, there would be other books dealing with the central european topic from many points of view. There is good evidence that CE is also a relevant theme for scholars from countries other than CE. Looking for the intensity of introducing of the central european topic, number of citation index and number of papers recorded in Web of Science, it seems they were sometimes better prepared for the scientific reflection of our central european changing social reality than those of us living in this region.

From this point, CE seems to be a kind of laboratory for ongoing political and economic processes interesting for many authors from “Western” countries.

## **4. Conclusion: General and specific challenges of Central Europe**

We believe that this book will be different when compared with the books and journals mentioned above.

- The genesis of the problem of definition itself was different: There was an open space for the definitions of contemporary central european problems from the beginning. No thematic or disciplinary or conceptual limits were made a priori. Challenges described in this book are the results of a bottom-up approach, often rather inductive than deductive.
- This book is written by central european scholars with co-authors who have some specific relationships to the central european region if not born here. The selection of papers was only geographical, to cover at least the V4 countries – i.e. the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary – and the quality of papers. This is the reason why not all of the contributions from the conference are represented in the book. Presented papers bring an expected scale of interdisciplinarity

in the social sciences with a diversity of approaches and topics. The published essays are case studies, not primarily political.

The results (however not representative) show endogenous as well as exogenous challenges. As to the endogenous challenge we can see the problem of social and cultural (historical) as well as political identification of the central european region. The end of social equality supported by former communist ideology and social practices is often a source of frustration for many (not only older) people living in CE. Looking for new forms of social solidarity is the logical continuation of this challenge. People in CE were rolled into the social and economic competitions without the time for an evolution of learning. The gap between expectation and reality is still huge.

But the exogenous challenges seem to be predominant: enter of EU, globalization and economic transformation. CE was not spared from the serious global challenges like a global economic crisis with an economic depression, an increasing number of unemployed people, global climate changes, or the global re-arrangement of the domain of interests. All of these global challenges represent serious challenges for CE, too. We can finish with the conclusion that *the general challenge* for CE is to seek strategies on how to face these global challenges.

*The rather specific challenge* for CE as appears in this book is the environmental problem and its social context. Attentive readers find some shift in the approach: the environmental challenge is no more of a problem in terms of alarming descriptions, but a problem in terms of the solution to education, alternatives in economic growth (green economy, bioeconomy), and the problem of the future modernization of CE. It does not allow for the making of some generalization in terms of the “greening” of central european society; it is more about adapting to a sustainable development challenge. On the other hand, the authors in this book show a clear adherence to pro-environmental thinking than is customary. A broad scale of social and economic challenges framed by the environment as a leading theme and driving force seems to be the specific contribution of this book.

## **Acknowledgement**

Miloslav Lapka acknowledges MSMT COST CZ support LD141118 “Land and Art: Cultural Sustainability” COST action IS 1007. Jan Vávra acknowledges support of the project Postdoc USB (reg. no. CZ.1.07/2. 3. 00/30.0006) realized through the EU Education for Competitiveness Operational Programme and funded by the European Social Fund and Czech state budget.

## References

- Bičík, I., & Jeleček, L. (2009). Land Use and Landscape Changes in Czechia During the Period of Transition 1990–2007. *Geografie – Sborník České Geografické Společnosti*, 114(4), 263–281.
- Central European History*. (2014). Retrieved from <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=CCC>
- Cirtautas, A. M., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2010). Europeanisation Before and After Accession: Conditionality, Legacies and Compliance. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62(3), p. 421–441.
- Cooperating in Central Europe*. (2014). Retrieved from [http://www.central2013.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Downloads/Events/2014/Annual\\_Event\\_2014\\_leaflet.pdf](http://www.central2013.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/Events/2014/Annual_Event_2014_leaflet.pdf)
- Cox, T., & Mason, B. (1999). *Social and Economic Transformation in East Central Europe: Institutions, Property Relations and Social Interests*. Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- East Central Europe*. (2013). Retrieved from <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/18763308/advance>
- Idnes.cz. (2012, February 12). Česko má čtvrtou nejhustší síť hypermarketů v Evropě [The Czech Republic's Density of Hypermarkets is the 4<sup>th</sup> Highest in Europe]. *Idnes.cz*. Retrieved from [http://ekonomika.idnes.cz/cesko-ma-ctvrtou-nejhustsi-sit-hypermarketu-v-evrope-pfe-/ekonomika.aspx?c=A120210\\_124959\\_ekonomika\\_spi](http://ekonomika.idnes.cz/cesko-ma-ctvrtou-nejhustsi-sit-hypermarketu-v-evrope-pfe-/ekonomika.aspx?c=A120210_124959_ekonomika_spi)
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (Eds.). (2005). *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Turnock, D. (2001): Environmental Problems and Policies in East Central Europe: A Changing Agenda. *GeoJournal*, 54, 485–505.
- Stark, D. L., & Bruszt, L. (1998). *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Steward, J. H. (1972). *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.