

Our Missing Central Europe

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 1980s Central Europe became the theme of literary and historiographical essays. Those who spoke of Central Europe in the 1980s did so in the hope that, after achieving freedom, the political agenda of the region will lead cooperations, via the great epiphanies of reuniting with one another. But the regime change brought the strengthening of the nation state mentality and of ethnicisms. The dream woven around Central Europe, undefined and shapeless, because it existed primarily as a literary concept, vanished into thin air. In order that the dream of the great writers of the 1980s may acquire the potential to take a political form sometime in the future, the idea should have first gained in strength and accrued in value there where it was born: in literary essays.

Keywords: Central Europe, 1989 regime change, literature, essay, nationalism, transnationalism

Does the entity that we used to call Central Europe still exist? Its name was not given by cartographers, geographers or historians, but by philosophers, poets and novelists, and the reason why it happened so is obvious. They called it so because even at that point in time it wasn't certain that what goes by the name Central Europe exists indeed. And something whose sheer existence is questionable cannot be scientifically defined. Since Friedrich Neumann's book "Mitteleuropa" was published in 1915, philosophers, poets and novelists went to great lengths to make it exist – people for whom words are not merely the carriers of something or its expression, as they are for everybody else, but the things themselves, and in the course of their work this engenders countless difficulties. And yet, in vain they uttered, transported and seized by hope, the magic word "Central Europe," in vain they placed all their trust in it, when from the odours and the sentences overheard on the street they first came to intuit that the Soviet system was not to last much longer: the instant they uttered it they looked around awkwardly to see if anybody else had noticed that what they were speaking about had not yet existed. One might say that they found themselves in the shoes of János Apáczai Csere, the first Hungarian encyclopaedist, as he pondered whether to make an entry for "phoenix" in his dictionary – constrained to decide if such a bird existed, for which he doubtlessly had a word, and about which so many writers had told tales across the centuries.

He couldn't make up his mind – or wouldn't. "The phoenix – he wrote – is an extremely rare fowl (perhaps it doesn't even exist anywhere in the world." (Apáczai Csere, 214)

As far as Central Europe is concerned, the writers of the mid-1980s found themselves facing a puzzle not unlike Apáczai's. In 1984 György Konrád called it a romantic, subversive dream (Konrád 1990, 153.), which appeared to him as a task incomplete for centuries. Milan Kundera became hesitant when he confronted the conceptions of culture with those of political geography: "Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation." (Kundera 1984) Central Europe's existence had been nothing but a hypothesis even for Czesław Miłosz, one he sought to validate by appealing to urban architecture, university tradition, and literary works.

Miłosz's hypothesis is undoubtedly the most factual of the three, and he was also the most methodical in attempting to lend historical reality to Central Europe. But in the end he, too, grounded its reality in the domain of subjectivity, in an intellectual's frame of thinking which bears obvious similarities to his own. The story he tells he could have experienced himself in the course of his journeys and residencies in America:

Now, let us imagine a Central European intellectual in his confrontation with the world at large, with his colleagues from Western Europe, America, or Latin America. As long as he keeps silence or, if he talks, spares the sensibilities of his interlocutors, everything is fine. As soon as he begins to talk frankly, he has the impression that he is regarded as a monster of irony and cynicism... He himself does not claim to be a Marxist or an anti-Marxist; he just shrugs and smiles, for he knows too much. There are, in his opinion, certain demonic subjects which must be approached warily, as many hidden traps and temptations wait there for the imprudent. Marxism appeals to the noble impulses in man, and thence its force of seduction. It is impossible to communicate the truth about it to anybody who has not seen it at work. (Miłosz 1990, 102–103)

How familiar this situation is: the Slovakian, Polish, Czech, Romanian, Bulgarian intellectual and the most self-important of them, the Hungarian intellectual share this mania in common, that the absurdities, demonic powers of history and the obtuse machinations of its actors have stripped him of all illusions, so that, compared to his knowledge obtained at great and painful cost, everybody who lives in allegedly happier parts of the world must be childish and naive. Is this what Central Europe is after all, this putative extra knowledge, the wisdom of the lack of illusions, which so often slides into ridicule? The loss of the capacity for doubt,

of the desire to learn, of the capacity to start anew and think anew – might this not be another name for an ill-disguised inferiority complex, a very typical intellectual disposition in Eastern European countries under Soviet control?

At the beginning of the 1980s Central Europe became the theme not only of literature but also of historiography. In his 1980 study *Sketch on the Three Regions of Europe*, Jenő Szűcs divided Europe into three parts, on the criteria of long-term historical processes and structural elements. His theory was profoundly marked by the experience of the Cold War and by the need to back up the striving for independence of the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellite states with the tools of historiography. Szűcs described the East and the West as constant, typologically immovable structures: in the former, civil liberties, while in the latter, the state's all-pervasive, oppressive and standardizing power define social relations. The in-between region is, according to him, a mix of these two types, which has never been successfully transformed into a stable model with legislative continuity and a continuity of mental frameworks, so in these quarters – the buffer zones of the world powers – the sole structuring power in the long run has remained the lack of balance, and the insecurity felt at every level of social exchange. (Cf. Csordás)

Following from Szűcs's argument, it was probably György Konrád who got the closest to grasping the idea of the region. According to him, what most characterizes Central Europe – of which he considered Germany a part, but whose core he, too, identified with the erstwhile territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – is the medley of ethnicities, to which the 19th-20th century nationalisms have responded with confused, inconsistent identity politics, giving a series of misjudged and plainly wrong answers.

We repeatedly merged into, and separated from one another. Mutual assimilations and dissimilations. Sometimes highly metaphorical combinations of belonging, varying by individual. Our nationalisms show a strong tendency toward self-enclosure, out of an anxiety of foreign influence, which invariably yields nothing more viable than the nation-state bureaucracies' and nation-state cultures' isolationist small-mindedness. (Konrád 1990, 154.) Thus for Konrád Central Europe is to be sought not in the present, let alone in the past, but in the future, as the hope and task of transcending nationalisms. Those who spoke of Central Europe in the 1980s did so in the hope that the insecurity described by Jenő Szűcs could be transcended after achieving freedom by the means of regional cooperation, via the great epiphanies of reuniting with one another. But the regime change brought the strengthening of

the nation state mentality and of ethnicisms that had been conspicuously ailing at the end of the socialist regime. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia fell apart. Within months the common imaginary was shrouded in the fumes of phantasmagoric national mythologies in almost all the countries of the region, first and foremost in Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia, because neither in tradition nor in contemporary thought were any narratives of true solidarity available, which might have offered the chance of genuine emotional identification to the masses. Everywhere nationalisms became the closest allies of a version of unchecked capitalism that ruthlessly depleted natural and social resources, caring little for the interest of employees – something it could easily afford during the long years of high unemployment – and even less for those living in poverty and precariousness, for the state of education and healthcare, and the state of the natural environment. By now Poland has joined with Hungary the sorry “club” of states where authoritarian tendencies have triumphed. In contradistinction to the Baltic countries, in this region the collapse of the socialist state did not result in a thorough-going mentality change. To a greater or lesser extent oligarchic structures emerged everywhere, corruption and legislative insecurity having sapped the culture of freedom and individual responsibility, still in its infancy. Both the middle classes and the poor became increasingly vulnerable; the old feudal reflexes are flexing their muscles again. In the region the new fortresses of mendacity and inanity sprang up, their walls more solid than concrete. All this casts a sombre shadow on the perspectives of the next generation and heightens the not inconsiderable risk of war on the continent.

The Central European dream might have materialized if the initiators and organizers of re-emerging cooperations and of mutual connecting had not been the state apparatuses, but the most diverse non-governmental, civic initiatives, and if all this had become part of family relations in time. Unfortunately nothing of this came to pass. The prime goal of the elites concentrated into various political parties after 1989 was the establishment of their own clientele and oligarchic hinterland. Political and economic power gave birth to the same kind of mutually dependent, closed systems based on nepotism as at the end of the 19th century and between the two World Wars. Joining the European Union, an act whose subjects were the states, could be of little help, what is more: the money of Western taxpayers served to consolidate, via legitimate institutional systems, the oligarchic autocracies, stifling free initiative and uprooting the vestiges of trust in the rule of law.

The Visegrad Cooperation founded by post-communist states, of which thus Austria is not a part, became a derisory parody of the former imaginings of Central Europe. Fortunately from time to time it ceases to function to all intents and purposes, but so far as it did function at all, its objective had been nothing else but to lend weight to the homegrown biases and bigotries, fundamentally diverging from, and occasionally openly clashing with, the ethical and political values adopted by the EU's core countries, and to the practice of nationalist isolationism and an absolutist interpretation of the state's role.

Today we cannot help but read with incredulity Kundera's confident 1983 paragraphs about the region's unequivocal belonging to the West, and his assertion that Central Europe's tragedy is solely due to its kidnapping and annexation by the Soviet Union. To put it less mildly: although in his time Kundera indeed helped bring round the hesitant Western European political leaders interested in keeping the Soviet Union afloat, as far as the content of his claim is concerned, he was unfortunately wrong. The underdeveloped state of civil society and the persistence of very old feudal reflexes and frames of thinking cannot be blamed on the political relations of the Cold War, for otherwise Central European societies should have shaken these off the way a dog shakes off water from its fur. But instead of Kundera's hopeful scenario, the feudal caste system was reborn, donning the forms known from the 1920s-30s, paralysing and ever more openly intimidating the culture of achievement and solidarity, barely out of its swaddling clothes.

The dream woven around Central Europe, undefined and shapeless, vanished into thin air, and nowadays we hardly ever mention it as a dream even. Might the reason be that the ones to formulate, in Czech, Polish, Slovak, Hungarian, Serbian and German, the versions of an idea born in the medium of literature, with the hopes and apprehensions of the regime change in their nerve endings, tried to transfer their ideas at once into the field of politics, that of the description of social interactions, fearing the ominous onward march of nationalisms — but they failed to define them? Thus after 1989, when various conceptions rivalled for shaping the region in their own image, the idea of Central Europe could not even enter the competition on account of its inchoateness. Apart from a few well-meaning, nondescript exceptions we cannot find the impact of this idea in any program of the region's political parties, although back in the 1990s it numbered quite a few powerful political supporters — first and foremost Erhard Busek, former Austrian vice-chancellor, and Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, Czech minister of foreign affairs between 2007–2009 and 2010–2013.

Today Central Europe exists primarily as a literary concept. But we shouldn't play down the importance of this mode of being. In his excellent *The Essay in Our America*, Germán Arciniegas observes that essays had already been written in the mid-16th century in Latin America, before Montaigne was born. Then he adds that in this part of the world the essay is not a literary pastime, but compulsory musing, thinking about the questions arising in the different epochs. "Compulsory musing": what a strange syntagm. What could be behind it? Arciniegas claims that Latin America, which to this day has remained a puzzle to some extent, an attempt at an encounter between a Christian and an Aztec or an Inca, was in fact not created by the weapons of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists. Mestizo America was born from the work of intellectuals, from essays. "America is the only continent to have appeared recently, the only one to have sprung out of what was totally unknown," Arciniegas writes in his excellent essay, and because I would like us to bear with him for a while, with due apologies I will quote him at length:

Some dreamers had premonitions of its existence but only as an exercise of the imagination, and even the best they could do was invent and then destroy an image, create a fantasy of Atlantis then tell of its immediate disappearance ... America erupted like the provocation for an essay. It is the ultimate subject... In truth, the essay on the New World began to be written in the first decade of the sixteenth century by the explorers themselves. Américo Vespucci discussed fully the problem of the color of American people just as he discussed all the geographical theories that stood between what men saw with their own eyes in the new world and what they had glimpsed in books. From the work of Las Casas or of Sahagún, one can extract independent essays in which it is wonderful to see how currents of medieval thought and humanism cross. Of everything said later in essay of the nineteenth century, there are adumbrations not at all negligible in those primitive texts born on the surprise of discovery... The Latin American essay is a passage along the edge of an abyss. Among our themes is the temptation that one feels only along the precipices of death. One of our first great essays, 'The Letter of Jamaica' by Bolívar, illustrates this dramatic element of our being. You look in vain in the writings of Washington for a comparable page. The deeds that the hero of north needed to consider during his campaigns or after his triumph never formed in him the urgency of reflections so profound... It is obvious that the natural resources of our America and its human reserves of communities formed in battles most anguished and unequal allow us to consider a future of extraordinary influence. But the depths from which we emerge place us in a tragic landscape. One cannot find as a theme for the essay anything more rich of contrasts, with more melancholy shadows, recondite secrets, and sharper crisis – and with more hymns of hope and life." (Arciniegas 2012, 78-81.)

Seen from the West, up to the reign of Maria Theresa, Central Europe had been in fact some kind of blurry, indistinct, uncivilized province outside of time, beyond which lurked, ready to charge, the great monotheistic adversaries of Roman Christianity, until they managed

to conquer a part of it. From then onwards not only did one have to share Central Europe with them, but it also became imminent to reconsider whether Rome indeed was the sole agent to realize salvation through history, or if others also had a share in that task. In fact one needed to consider whether Rome had not misunderstood from the beginning the whole essence of salvation to be attained in history. In the 16th-17th century many travellers and envoys reached the Carpathian Basin, leaving us formidable descriptions. The role that early essays played in the history of Latin America could have been taken, in the case of Central Europe, by these travel narratives. But they never came to define the concept of the region. It is striking how in their wake, in the 19th century no essays follow but poems, and especially anecdotic novels and short stories. Central Europe existed for a very long time in anecdotes which, at the moment when the region's states fall apart, were summed up in a truly wonderful book, Jaroslav Hašek's *Švejk*. The mythical prototype of *The Good Soldier Švejk* encapsulated the mentality of the region's petty *Kleinmensch* – of the survival artist adapting, without revolt, to the most preposterous situations, his apparent doltishness turning out to be astute. Interestingly, in the same period the negative version of this type was also born in Prague: Franz Kafka's Josef K. who perishes, without the relief of the merest uplifting tragedy, by the death sentence never clearly articulated by faceless authority, which strips him of his history and his life, leaving him in the end to die like a dog.

The essay was present to a painfully small degree at the foundation of the Central-Europe concept – and together with it, everything that we call an attempt at articulating thought, in the sense willed by Montaigne: the unique adventure when somebody grasps the singularity, the once-and-for-allness of the individual by contemplating an object, relentlessly putting his judgment on trial, and by arguing why he thinks what he thinks. The essay in fact only makes an appearance in the Central-Europe text in the 20th century, not long before the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was the time when urban growth spectacularly exploded in the region, the movement of capital gained new momentum, Vienna, Prague and Budapest became the setting for the emergence of new scientific and cultural models, and the mobility of various ethnic groups increased exponentially.

But this late development was followed by quick decline. The region had not recovered to this day from the consequences of World War I. The 19th-century nationalisms were clearly not interested in hammering out the Central-Europe text, but the latter quickly found itself in opposition after WWI as well, faced with the interwar regimes, and later the

region's Communist parties. That the essay may play an important role in history against all odds was demonstrated by this very period and later, even more emphatically, by the period of the regime changes. In Hungary the classical political essay evolved in the wake of György Lukács, Oszkár Jászi, Gyula Szegfű and István Bibó. Everywhere in the European communist countries the regime changes were anticipated and for a short while even accompanied by a flowering of the genre, but this rare plant withered almost completely, because the emerging new societies were not bound into a network by the living veins and channels of common thinking, and because journalism ousted it from public space. Public debates vanished, atrophied in the desert of mutual stereotyping and labelling, of mutually exclusive truisms.

In order that the dream of the great writers of the 1980s may acquire the potential to take a political form sometime in the future, the idea should first gain in strength and accrue in value there where it was born: in literature, philosophy, and the arts. The history of the Hungarian-language *Visegrad Books* series, published by Kalligram Publishing House², is instructive in this respect. Let us place the volumes in a row: Tadeusz Konwiczki, *The Polish Complex* (with a Foreword by Adam Michnik, Afterword by Gábor Csordás), Dominik Tatarka, *Agony* (with a Foreword by Milan Hamada, Afterword by Erzsébet Juhász), Rudolf Chmel (ed.), *A The Slovakian Question in the 20th Century* (with a Foreword by Rudolf Chmel, Afterword by Csaba Kiss Gy.), Bohumil Hrabal, *Schizophrenic Gospel* (with a Foreword by Milan Jankovič, Afterword by Endre Bojtár), Adam Michnik, *The Trouble with History* (with a Foreword by Józef Tischner, Afterword János Kis), Jan Patočka, *What Are the Czechs?* (with a Foreword by Petr Pithart, Afterword by Mihály Vajda). These six books offered to the Hungarian reader the unknown closest at hand, for only painfully few Hungarian readers are capable of seeing the region through the eyes of Czech, Polish or Slovak writers and thinkers. And yet this is exactly what we need: to learn, to acquire the gaze of the next-door stranger, which would make it possible for the Central European peoples to see one another not as rivals, but as the other living with them, whose difference, so to speak, can be located in ourselves. This might enable us to render the territory into a common region in the geographical, historical, cultural sense. Today, however, this extra knowledge can only be

² The Kalligram Publishing House was founded by László Szigeti in 1991 in Bratislava. It worked since 1991 in Budapest as well. Very soon, it became one of the most important publishers of contemporary Hungarian and Slovakian literature and social sciences. The Kalligram Publishing House stopped its appreciated activity in Slovakia in 2017, but it still exists in Hungary.

relied on in the domain of culture and literature. I wonder how many readers seized Attila József's verses seriously:

“Turks,
Tartars, Rumanians, Slovaks, storm this heart.
If in great depths a quiet future lurks,
It owes the past, to-day's Hungarians, part.

I want to work”³ -?

The volumes published in Kalligram's *Visegrad Books* series appeared between 1996 and 1997. At that time the mutual cooperation of the Visegrad countries came to take a back seat in politics, before the situation changed again a few years later. It became obvious that the programme was not grounded in principle, but was solely the negligible or revivable tool of the assertion of domestic interests in Brussels. For this reason, the publisher dropped the series title. László Szigeti, Kalligram's spiritual father said in an interview in 2000: “Politicians are simply not worth our advertising them through literature, and it is definitely not worth advertising something that they will now put into the showcase, only to remove it in the next moment.” (Morvay 2000)

But within other book series, Kalligram has published countless seminal works of fiction, sociology and historiography about Central Europe. I count among these not only the books of Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, Danilo Kiš and Alexander Tišma, István Bibó and Miklós Mészöly, Tomáš Garyk Masaryk and Václav Havel, Ľubomír Lipták and Juraj Špitzer - the classics - but also the works of influential historians, linguists and literary historians. And these are only the Hungarian-language books. What gave Kalligram extraordinary weight over the past quarter of a century was that it carried out a rich publishing programme in two languages, Hungarian and Slovak. With its books of philosophy and social sciences it became an important reference point for the Slovakian intelligentsia as well; it also started a journal of philosophy, *Anthropos*, and a monthly journal of social criticism, *OS*, which means “axis” in Slovak, as well as the abbreviation of “civil society,” also alluding to Karl Popper's term, *open society*, in both Slovak and English. Such a complex and extensive publishing programme is unparalleled in the region's history and could obviously have only

³ Attila József, *A Dunánál (By the Danube)*, trans. Vernon Watkins, http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/J%C3%B3zsef_Attila-1905/A_Dun%C3%A1n%C3%A1l/en/1766-By_the_Danube

emerged in a multilingual, multicultural environment. The greatest loss that Central Europe has incurred in several waves since WWI was the cultural and linguistic homogenization, accompanied by psychic and physical violence. Such a situation can only be assuaged by the natural heterogeneity of thought, of which the twin, Hungarian and Slovak publishing project of Kalligram is a suitable emblem.

If someone takes a look at Kalligram's output of the last 25 years, they will very likely feel embittered at the sight of such treasures wasted on Central European societies' history of fiascos. For it is sufficient to glance at the headlines of the major daily papers, and our everyday experience is reinforced: the world is every bit as complicated, insecure, and as much filled with injustices, falsehood and tragedies as ever. Chagrined, we can affirm that what is going on, albeit in the context of contemporary globalization, is just the old tune. Not even the most cocksure, or the ones who deny others empathy, can escape the feeling of insecurity and threat. We move in time with our back towards the future: the present opens to us as the past's foreground. And the shared European past is traumatic. However justified in our bitterness, we should not judge our present-day situation from the perspective of the exaggerated hopes that defined the political atmosphere of the global North at the time when Kalligram was founded. Europe got over the Cold War, but didn't turn into the peaceful space which is rendered homely by the ethos of solidarity and enlightened reason. The times have come back, even in places beyond one's own region, when even the day-to-day acting-out of humaneness requires great effort, stamina and courage in the face of the cynical viciousness tabulated into the letter of the law.

However, the blame for our bitterness lies not with the state of the books but with the state of our region and the world. The writing, editing and publishing of books remains, even in situations such as ours, a source of ongoing hope. Writing, the creation of books has not simply accompanied every culture from the moment of their birth: cultures are created by writing, by books. To be sure, the world as we know it has always been confusing, threatening – and friendly at the same time. And books had always played their part in the threatening, the confusion, as well as in the friendliness. In the course of its twenty-five-year existence – so short, as compared to the age of the world – Kalligram has always been the home of the spirit of friendliness. Franz Rosenzweig's American translator, Barbara Galli writes in her Acknowledgements: "Friendships have formed, are forming, through us, between us, those of

us who have met with Franz Rosenzweig upon the pages he left for us, these very rich pages that touch us to think, to think anew.” (Galli 2005, vii.)

One could hardly render with more precision what a book is. A place of encounters, of the leaving behind of reminders, and of reminding, where friendships are made, and thoughts set out, travelling beyond fears, beyond the world’s chaos, beyond death. If the book is this, then the spirit of friendship and encounters also animates the publisher, the one committed to thought, to the past and the future; and it animates all those who participate in the creation of the book. Let us therefore not forget that the hope conceived in the spirit of friendliness which can make our imagined and missing Central Europe not only a region where essays feel at home, but also where all of its nations, all of its people and its guests can peacefully live together.

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