

**Discourses About Central Europe**  
**in Hungarian and Polish Essayism After 1989**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis traces the developments in the discourse about Central Europe following the peak of its popularity in the 1980s. First, it overviews the origins and various definitions of the concept. Then, it discusses the 1980s' discourse which lays ground for the further analysis. Finally, it examines a selection of essays representative for the post-1989 discourse written by Krzysztof Czyżewski, Péter Esterházy, Aleksander Fiut, Lajos Grendel, Csaba Gy. Kiss, Robert Makłowicz, Andrzej Stasiuk, and László Végel. The analysis is organized around three research questions: how do the authors employ the term of Central Europe, what features they attribute to the region and who do they perceive as significant others of Central Europe.

The post-1989 essayism about Central Europe demonstrated several continuities and ruptures in comparison with the discourse of the 1980s. On the one hand, contemporary authors define Central Europe in a similar way and find analogous features of the region. On the other hand, the discourse became depoliticized, no longer focused on the political divisions of the continent, and it avoided the exclusivism of the concept. Finally, in spite of the change of circumstances after 1989, the discourse proved its rootedness both in Polish and Hungarian contexts. Yet, it underwent a sort of “privatization,” meaning that the uses of the term of Central Europe became more individualized and varied.

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## Introduction

In the 1980s, the concepts of regional identity and distinctiveness of Central Europe became increasingly popular among the intellectuals of a region that stretched from the Federal Republic of Germany to the Soviet Union. The debate on what Central Europe is, and what is specific in the culture of this region involved mainly the dissidents from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and sometimes other communist countries (such as Yugoslavia and Romania), as well as intellectuals who were in exile abroad.

The appeal of the concept, its rationale and the understanding of its meaning diverged; however what was similar for practically all the participants of the debate was the sense of a common fate of the region and a need for political and cultural emancipation. All the countries mentioned above were part of the so-called Eastern Bloc, politically under domination of the Soviet Union. The frequently used metaphor of the Iron Curtain meant a real separation of the two halves of the continent after the Second World War. Therefore, one of the goals of the authors such as Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz or György Konrád<sup>1</sup> was to question this political divide with cultural and historical arguments. They emphasized the Western character of their countries, such as the tradition of democracy, Latin Christianity, Western art, architecture, literature etc. According to them, only due to a political misfortune their countries came under the influence of the Eastern empire whose values were foreign to Central Europeans.

Some of them went as far as calling this region a “kidnapped West” (Kundera), while others chose to emphasize the particularity of Central Europe stating that it constitutes a

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *New York Review of Books* 31 (1984): 33-38; Czesław Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” *Cross Currents* 5 (1986): 101-108; György Konrád, “Letter from Budapest,” *Cross Currents* 1 (1982): 12-14.

separate, unique blend of different cultural and religious trends (eg. Miłosz, Konrad, Danilo Kiš), which however cannot be simply classified as Eastern. Many used the concept to avoid a nationalist or chauvinistic response to the Soviet domination and the idea of a regional, Central European identity was a useful device to question it. However, as Iver Neumann<sup>2</sup> and Maria Todorova<sup>3</sup> pointed out, this regional discourse also had an exclusivist character, treating other countries or regions as significant (constitutive) others for Central Europe, for example Russia (Neumann) or the Balkans (Todorova). They criticized the use of the concept in exposing the positive qualities of one region at the expense of others. Nevertheless, both authors agreed that at a given time it was a useful tool to emancipate the region from the Cold War division.

Many argued that the Central European “discourse community” – term proposed by Guido Snel in his PhD dissertation, entitled “Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe”<sup>4</sup> – lost its vigour in 1989, when the Cold War ended, thus its political rationale vanished. Its end was marked symbolically by the death of Danilo Kiš in the same year. Others claimed that the postulates of the “discourse community” can be finally realized in the democratizing and transforming region. Nonetheless, the discourse about Central Europe persisted. Although it did not become the main narrative after 1989, the regional identity has not lost its appeal for many.

It can be partly explained taking the assumption presented by Larry Wolff in his seminal book “Inventing Eastern Europe.” He suggests that the East-West divide in Europe has much deeper roots than the Cold War political split of the continent. He finds traces of the current polarization of Europe back in the Enlightenment. It was in this period that Western

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<sup>2</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “Russia as Central Europe’s Constituting Other,” *East European Politics and Societies* 7/2 (Spring 1993): 349-369.

<sup>3</sup> Maria N. Todorova, “Hierarchies of Eastern Europe: East Central Europe Versus the Balkans,” *South East European Monitor* 5 (1995): 5-46.

<sup>4</sup> Guido Snel, *Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe* (Amsterdam, 2003).

Europe “invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half.”<sup>5</sup> The civilization of the West was opposed to the shadowed lands of backwardness or even barbarism of the East. Strikingly, this mental map created in the Enlightenment overlapped with the geopolitical division of Europe after the Second World War. Although it is arguable that Winston Churchill in his famous Fulton speech in 1946 reflected not only on a new geopolitical divide, but also expressed the approach grounded in Western thinking since Enlightenment, clearly the prejudices of the wealthy West against the poor East originated from the times that precede the Cold War. The Iron Curtain would thus strengthen the deep grounded division rather than create it out of nowhere.

That is partly why the discourse on Central Europe did not simply disappear after 1989, when the geopolitical divide vanished, because the deep rooted mental split of the continent remained. For many intellectuals of the region, the Central European identity was still appealing. Even though it acquired new traits, some of the old characteristics remain valid, like a sense of being a periphery and a victim of history, or a feeling of being akin in a cultural or historical way with other little nations situated in the middle of the continent. Thus, in this thesis I would like to examine a number of essays written after 1989, in which the authors continue the reflection on the idea of Central Europe, on the identity of the region and on its history. It will demonstrate what is the genealogy of the current writing on Central Europe, identify the continuities and discontinuities with their predecessors, as well as new trends that aroused after 1989.

In the first chapter I will briefly describe the origins of the term and history of the concept of Central Europe, as well as various understandings of the concept. It will also touch on different uses of the term by various disciplines, such as history, political science, geography etc. The second chapter will address the main issues discussed in the debate on

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1994), 4.

Central Europe in the 1980s. It will be based on secondary literature, as well as a few basic texts from the period (Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, György Konrád, Danilo Kiš). It will also present the criticism that the pre-1989 discourse encountered. Finally, in the third chapter I will discuss the changes and continuity in a selection of texts on Central Europe written after 1989. Several Polish and Hungarian essays will be scrutinized, written by eight authors: Péter Esterházy, Lajos Grendel, Csaba Gy. Kiss, László Végel on the Hungarian side and Krzysztof Czyżewski, Aleksander Fiut, Robert Makłowicz and Andrzej Stasiuk, on the Polish side.

Certainly, the research does not cover all the authors referring to the concept of Central Europe, it rather deals with a sample. The authors listed above were selected using two criteria: the recurrence of the term in their works and the originality of their approach. First, the authors had to treat the issue extensively, even if it was not usually their main or the only interest. Secondly, represent a particularly interesting approach, and not being analyzed so far by the scholarship from this perspective.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, they should be treated rather as case studies, than a survey on the discourse on Central Europe in Poland and Hungary as a whole. Moreover, these essays do not argue the applicability of the term of Central Europe as an analytical tool. They rather display the emotional stance of the authors towards the concept and its treatment from a literary or essayistic point of view. The concept of Central Europe serves them usually as a frame of identity or a postulate for a certain project.

Mast of these texts can be qualified as essays. This literary genre was most often employed to write about Central Europe, both before and after 1989. It allows the writer to freely present his personal point of view and to reflect on the topic with no academic constraint. Most of the authors that are dealt with in this thesis are novelists and essayism

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<sup>6</sup> The only author, whose writings on Central Europe gained some scholar interest is Andrzej Stasiuk. Yet, it remains rather unknown outside the Polish scholarship, moreover his approach is so peculiar and interesting that he could hardly be omitted from this selection of authors. His writings on Central Europe were analyzed for example by: Piotr Millati, "Inna Europa. Nowa mitologia Europy Środkowej w prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka," in *(Nie)obecność. Pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, edited by Hanna Gosk and Bożena Karwowska. Warszawa: Elipsa, 2008; Oksana Weretiuk, "Jurij Andruchowycz i Andrzej Stasiuk o tożsamości ukształtowanej przez historię." *Porównania* 9 (2011): 89-100.

constitutes their side activity. Some of them, like Esterházy or Stasiuk are among the most renowned and internationally acclaimed novelists from their respective countries. Others, like Grendel or Végel are of the best writers of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and Serbia, however also recognized in Hungary itself. Yet others, like Czyżewski, Makłowicz, Fiut and Kiss, are particularly known for their essays and in the case of the latter two, for the scholarly work as well. Almost none of the texts are translated into English, thus all essays will be analyzed in their original Hungarian or Polish language.

The analysis of each text will be organized around three main research questions. First, it will identify the understanding of the notion of Central Europe by the author, answering the questions of what Central Europe is; does it overlap with some past entities such as the Habsburg empire or Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; does it exclude any territories from the region of Central Europe. Secondly, the main traits of the region presented by the author will be analyzed, inquiring how he assess them and to what extent he perceives them unique. Thirdly, it will look closer at the attitude towards other parts of the continent of a given author, answering who is the “other” for a Central European, does the author unveil any sentiment of superiority or inferiority towards East and West, does he present his region as centre or periphery. Finally, it will also look for links between a given author and his intellectual predecessors - to what extent he continues the well-known directions of the debate on Central Europe or present a new, refined or simplified, perspective.

## 1. Definitions, Scope and History of the Concept of Central Europe

Central Europe is a term that is nowadays well grounded in the consciousness of the people in the region. Although it is hard to talk about a collective Central European identity the same way as about a national one, it would hardly be an overstatement to say that many citizens of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Austria, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania and other countries of the region will admit that the term Central Europe relates to them and the surrounding space. Even though there is no survey to confirm it, it suffices to look at the number of initiatives or projects undertaken under the label of Central Europe, to assume that a regional, Central European identification became at least a part of their self-recognition for many people.

After 1989, several institutions in different fields were created under the name of Central European, such as Central European Initiative, Central European Institute of Technology or Central European University. There are Central European magazines and journals that deal with history, politics or social issues of the region, among others the Journal of East Central Europe. Even outside the humanities a number of journals edited in the region also bear Central Europe in their name, for instance Central European Journal of Chemistry or Journal of Central European Agriculture. It is possible to find even such peculiar uses of the term as Közép-Európai Állatorvosi Központ – a Central European Veterinary Centre. Some universities offer courses on Central European history or politics, or even entire programs in Central European studies (for example at Charles University in Prague or Jagiellonian University in Krakow).

Central Europe also became a common denominator for several cultural initiatives. A state funded Közép-Európai Kulturális Intézet (Central European Cultural Institute) operates in Budapest which aims at fostering „better communication between Central European

cultures.”<sup>7</sup> Polish state-sponsored Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury (International Cultural Centre) is engaged in many projects involving partners from the region and one of its main field of interest is „Central Europe’s multiculturalism, memory and identity.”<sup>8</sup> Since 2006, Wrocław city council awards a yearly “Central European literary prize - Angelus.” With the support of the Slovak state, every year the Central European Forum brings to Bratislava prominent intellectuals to discuss the main issues of public interest in the region.

There is also a great number of grass root initiatives under the Central European name. These are for instance the Terra Recognita Foundation which aims at promoting the knowledge of Central Europe in Hungary. Several other projects under the label of Central Europe are being undertaken thanks to the help of the International Visegrad Fund which awards grants to projects involving at least two countries of the region. Central Europe entered the blogosphere as well. Among the most active blogs about the region are: Kelet-Közép Európa Blog (East-Central European Blog),<sup>9</sup> Melano – a közép-európaiak magazinja (Melano – Magazine of Central Europeans)<sup>10</sup> and Panorama Kultur – Europa Mniej Znana (Panorama of Cultures – the Europe less known).<sup>11</sup> Overall, the term became well grounded in the public discourse.

However, despite of its quite popular use nowadays, the term Central Europe, describing the lands between the German and Russian linguistic areas, has a relatively short tradition. Although it appeared sporadically before the II World War, some tracing its origins even in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, only in the Cold War period and especially in its last phase in the 1980s Central Europe established itself as a widely used term, to finally enter the official discourse after 1989. Interestingly, the concept started its career at a very different point than when it was developed during the Central European debate of the nineteen-eighties and

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ceci.hu/cities/frame.jsp?lang=ENG&HomeID=99>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mck.krakow.pl/page/14>

<sup>9</sup> <http://kelet-europa.blog.hu/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://melano.hu/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.pk.org.pl>

afterwards. In 1915 a German liberal nationalist thinker Friedrich Naumann published a book entitled “Mitteleuropa”<sup>12</sup> which became with more than 100,000 copies a bestseller in Germany.<sup>13</sup> Naumann postulated the integration of small nations of the region and overcoming the conflicts among them. In this respect, his agenda was somewhat similar to various federal projects advocated then and later by many Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovakian thinkers (eg. Milan Hodža, Oszkár Jászi, Józef Piłsudski). However, what was fundamentally different between them is that according to Neumann the region would be integrated under the Austrian and German supremacy. Hegemony of any empire was at odds with the concepts formulated by the non-German federalists of the region, who actually wanted to integrate exactly in order to avoid the dominance of one of their big neighbours.

Therefore, the term Central Europe was not particularly popular in the Czech, Hungarian, Polish or Slovakian political thought of the interwar period. Although the concept was used sometimes by Czech or Slovak proponents of the regional cooperation, they would rather refer to the region as Eastern Europe. The idea of *Mitteleuropa* was then revived by the Nazi propaganda during the II World War which could seem to finally bury this term for the nations that experienced the German occupation. Quite the contrary, the period after 1945 brought its renaissance, however in a significantly different context and understanding. Although rejected by the communist propaganda in the countries of the region, the concept became gradually popular among the dissidents and intellectuals in exile. The term Central Europe turned out to be a useful device to undermine the manichaeistic East-West divide, and finally was popularized by a group of dissident writers in the 1980s. This peculiar career of the term is aptly captured by Wolff, who points out the irony of using the term Central Europe by Czech or Hungarian intellectuals as an “ideological antidote to the iron curtain,” given its

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<sup>12</sup> In English: Friedrich Naumann, *Central Europe* (New York: Knopf, 1917).

<sup>13</sup> John Neubauer, “What’s in a name? *Mitteleuropa*, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe,” *Kakanien Revisited* (07.05.2003): 4.

former use by German propaganda to promote the conquest of these territories<sup>14</sup>. Nonetheless, despite its complicated origins and relatively short life-time, the term grounded itself in different national context (*Střední Evropa, Közép-Európa, Europa Środkowa, Stredná Európa etc.*) and became a widely used term to call this region internationally.

When it comes to the definition and geographical scope of the term, the situation is as complex as with its history. Definitions of Central Europe vary significantly, depending on the author and his geographical, historical, cultural or political interpretations. The complexity of the use of the term reflects for instance the article from 1954 by a German geographer Karl Sinnhuber.<sup>15</sup> He collected sixteen definitions of Central Europe and concluded that the only part of Europe which was never included in any of them was the Iberian Peninsula. All the other parts of the continent were included in different configurations.

The geographical reach of Central Europe depends then on the origins of a given observer, his discipline and ideological approach. For Sinnhuber himself and in most of other German interpretations, Central Europe comprises lands of Austria, Bohemia and Moravia. Neumann and his heirs would definitely place Germany in the heart of Central Europe. Another German approach is to consider as Central European only Bavaria and Saxony, out of the territory of current Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Poles tend to treat as Central Europe also the historical territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, that is a significant portion of lands in contemporary Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. In this way, also the territories that do not belong any more to Poland are included. One of the most popular approaches is to identify Central Europe with the former territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Central Europe serves then as an euphemism for the federal state that until its collapse in 1918 included most of the nationalities of the region. Besides the Czech, Austrian

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<sup>14</sup> Wolff, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Sinnhuber, "Central Europe – Mitteleuropa – Europe Centrale: An Analysis of a Geographical Term," Transactions and Papers, no. 20 (1954): 15-39.

<sup>16</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 232.

and Hungarian lands, it embraces entirely or partly the territories of contemporary Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. This approach is particularly popular in Hungary or Austria, two nations that constituted the monarchic union.

As the countries that are most often categorised as Central European – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – are nowadays widely perceived as successful stories of the post-communist transition and as stable members of the Euro-Atlantic community, some of the authors from the countries that aspire to become members of the European Union, underline their belonging to Central Europe. That is for instance the case of many Ukrainian intellectuals, mainly those from Western Ukraine, such as Yuri Andrukhovych<sup>17</sup>. They emphasize the historical links with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or more often, to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to prove their Central Europeanness, and eventually their belonging to the Western civilization. They somehow repeat the cultural argument of the Central European discursive community from the 1980s that used it to question the political divide. Although the Cold War is over, the countries to the East of the EU – or Schengen – border, perceives it as a new kind of a curtain and it happens sometimes that the concept of Central Europe is redeployed to undermine it.

The concept of Central Europe became a handy device after 1989 especially for political scientists. Already in the beginning of the transition period, the paths of the former communist countries together with the again independent Baltic States were different than the one of post-Soviet area. In Central European countries political, economic and social transition was – even if the process had different dynamics – progressing fast, the democratization and marketization was soon consolidated, and all of these countries joined the Euro-Atlantic structures. In contrast, the former Soviet Republics (except Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) suffered political instability and economical crises. Thus, in the field

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<sup>17</sup> Jurij Andruchowycz, “Środkowowschodnie rewizje” [“Central Eastern Revisions”] in *Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej środkową* (Jurij Andruchowycz and Andrzej Stasiuk), Wołowiec: Czarne, 2000.

of political sciences, the term is used mainly to address the region of the Visegrad Group (V4) – a political alliance created in 1991 and consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Similarly to the way that the group operates in the extended configurations – so called “V4 plus” formats – some political scientists extend their definition of Central Europe to such countries as Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Moldova, Baltic countries. In the widest way the term Central Europe covers all the post-communist countries that underwent the transition period in the 1990s, stretching from Estonia to Albania. It became a more neutral synonym of such terms as the “Eastern Bloc,” or “Eastern Europe.”

Terms like Central Europe or East-Central Europe have also displayed analytical merits for historians. As Iordachi, Janowski and Trencsényi argue, “regions provide a huge analytical potential for historical research.”<sup>18</sup> Despite some scepticism in historiography about using recent concepts to refer to a distant history, a lot of comparative research has been conducted employing these terms. Especially after 1989, there was a growing interest to go beyond the national narrative and compare the history of the countries on a regional level. However even before, such phenomena as backwardness, development of national movements or second serfdom were approached by the historians as transgressing the national scope leading to a regional dimension. And to a large extent these were the historical works that triggered the Central European debate conducted by the intellectuals. Works of such historians, as Jenő Szűcs<sup>19</sup> or Oskar Halecki<sup>20</sup>, served as an inspiration for a wider debate on the identity of the region. Their works brought in the idea of a different mapping of Europe, marking out a third part of the continent located in the middle.

Furthermore, Central Europe is not a unique term to describe the region. Across the literature one can find such term as “East-Central Europe,” “Central-Eastern Europe,” “South-

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<sup>18</sup> Constantin Iordachi, Maciej Janowski and Balázs Trencsényi, “Why bother about regions : debates over symbolic geography in Poland, Hungary and Romania,” *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1-2 (2005): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jenő Szűcs, *Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról* (Budapest 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Oskar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950).

Eastern Europe,” “Carpathian Europe,” “Danubian Europe,” “Younger Europe,” “Slavonic Europe,” “Other Europe,” “in-between Europe” etc. Sometimes they are used simply as synonyms to Central Europe. At times, however, their use indicates a certain position of the author. For instance the term East-Central Europe underlines that it describes countries to the East of Germany, especially if we treat the German lands as Mitteleuropa (which supposedly would be the West-Central Europe).<sup>21</sup> Central-Eastern Europe is a term often used in Poland, in order to emphasize that the region includes the historical lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The apologists of the Habsburg Empire occasionally call this region Carpathian or Danubian Europe, which is meant to reflect the territory of Austria-Hungary. Younger Europe is a term used by some Polish historians (such as Jerzy Kłoczowski) that see the Christianization (which happened around the year 1000, much later than in the Western and Southern parts of the continent) as a development constitutive for the region.

Finally, the term Central Europe brings positive connotations from the semantic point of view. The adjective “central” or the noun “centre” can be associated with such notions as equilibrium or balance. Additionally, in Polish and Hungarian, for instance, the adjectives “środkowy/a” and “közép” evokes the Aristotle’s concept of “middle mean” or the Buddhists’ “middle way.” They reveal a positive meaning of something distant from extremities and mediating between two different sides. Thus, the concept has an additional positive load, when looking at the associations that the adjective “central” evokes. Contrary to the terms “East” or “Eastern” which are associated rather with backwardness, wilderness and other phenomena, bringing rather negative images to mind.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis is devoted to analyze the contemporary use of the term, however referring also to the previous concepts of Central Europe. Among other things, it will examine which regional terms are currently in use and whether various regional labels (such as East-Central

<sup>21</sup> This division was first proposed by Oskar Halecki in his book *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950)

<sup>22</sup> More on the image of the East in the eyes of the Western people in: Wolff, “Inventing Central Europe.”

Europe or Eastern-Central Europe) alter the meaning, or if they are used interchangeably with the term Central Europe. In the second chapter this issue is treated only cursorily, whereas the third chapter, where the post-1989 authors are analyzed, examines in detail the different employment of these terms.

## 2. Renaissance of the Discourse About Central Europe in the 1980s and its Critics

This chapter discusses the concept of Central Europe at the peak of its career. The first subsection is devoted to the renaissance of the concept in the late 1970s and 1980s. It presents main traits of the discourse and the standpoints of the most prominent adherents. The second section brings up the critical evaluation of the discourse on Central Europe, in large part coming from the Western scholars. Overall, this section will lay the ground for the analysis of the post-1989 literature on Central Europe which was developed partly as a continuation of the previous debates, partly however as its negation.

### 2.1. The Discourse about Central Europe in the 1980s

The popularity of the term Central Europe (or East Central Europe) gained its momentum in the 1980s. Before, as Schöpflin puts it, with a bit of exaggeration though, the term Central Europe was used “almost exclusively by the elderly survivors of Austria-Hungary and was dismissed by most people as a remnant, a sentimental leftover from the nostalgic days of Francis Joseph with no relevance to anything contemporary.”<sup>23</sup> In fact the term appeared sometimes in scholarship; however it was only in 1980s that it became popular. In the last decade of the Cold War, the most prominent intellectuals of the region began discussing the regional identity as well as promoting regional cooperation under the label of Central Europe. Among them were internationally acclaimed writers, such as the Nobel Prize winner Polish poet Czesław Miłosz or the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, author of the famous *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The protagonists of the debate were thus some of the best writers of the period, which was one of the reasons that the concept became well known.

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<sup>23</sup> George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood, *In Search of Central Europe*. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 1.

Moreover, many of their texts were published by prestigious Western magazines, such as the American *New York Review of Books* or French *Le Débat*. Actually, the main venue of the debate became an American yearly *Cross Currents*, published from 1982 to 1993 by the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan.<sup>24</sup>

In that period, there was not much possibility to learn about the Eastern Bloc in the West and the region remained largely unknown to the Western public. Even though some academic exchanges were conducted between the two foreign camps, in the humanities the contacts were exceptionally limited. Therefore, the community of writers in exile, as well as some dissident writers of those countries that were smuggling their writings abroad, became spokesmen of the region. They themselves triggered the interest in Central Europe, but also the political developments in the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s created the demand for reliable information about these countries, unavailable from the official sources.<sup>25</sup> This correlation also contributed to the popularity of the concept.

Guido Snel calls this circle of intellectuals writing about the region the “Central Europe discourse community.”<sup>26</sup> He includes in its backbone Czesław Miłosz (as its leader), Danilo Kiš, György Konrád, Péter Esterházy and Claudio Magris. Among other participants, according to Snel, were Josef Škvorecký, Adam Zagajewski, Adam Michnik and Predrag Matvejević. One can also include several other authors that contributed to the debate about Central Europe, just to name a few: Josef Kroutvor, Milan Šimečka, Mihály Vajda, Csaba Gy. Kiss, Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera. Interestingly, Snel does not include Kundera in this group, or if so, only in the initial phase of the community’s existence. The reason is that soon after publishing his seminal essay, Kundera retreated from the debate, to finally even forbid

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<sup>24</sup> All the journal’s archives are accessible online, at: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/crossc/>.

<sup>25</sup> Aleksander Fiut, *Być (albo nie być) Środkowoeuropejczykiem*. [To Be (Or not to be) Central European]. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1999), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Snel, 8.

republishing his work, explaining that it was tailor made for the Western audience and was relevant only in the particular moment and context in which it appeared.

Nevertheless it was his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,”<sup>27</sup> published in English in 1984, that became a drive for the debate. Although accused later of historical simplification, exclusivism or even racism<sup>28</sup>, his essay invigorated the Central European debate and became one of the formative texts for a whole generation of Central European intellectuals. Up to today, practically every author referring to the concept of Central Europe takes Kundera’s essay as a starting point. Compared to the works of Miłosz, written in a more essayistic, refined way, “The Tragedy of Central Europe” is an easy read with a clear argument, short paragraphs and many catchy sentences. Such expressions describing the region, such as the “kidnapped West,” a “condensed version of Europe itself,”<sup>29</sup> “the greatest variety within the smallest place,”<sup>30</sup> “Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate,”<sup>31</sup> have served as mottos for countless literary, journalistic or scientific texts about the region, and they have been used up until today. Controversial as it was, thanks to Kundera’s popular essay, in the words of Tony Judt “a veritable baggage train of Central European writers”<sup>32</sup> could come to the fore and introduce their point of view on the region to the Western readership.

Kundera voiced what was at a very basis of the Central European discourse, namely the idea that the geopolitical division after 1945 does not overlap with the cultural boundaries. He strongly opposed considering his region as Eastern Europe and equating it with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, actually contrary to the majority of other protagonists of the debate, he

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<sup>27</sup> The essay was published first in the French periodical *Le Débat* (no. 27/1983), with an even stronger statement in the title: “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe central” [The kidnapped West or the tragedy of Central Europe].

<sup>28</sup> He was strongly criticized by the Russian emigrant writers, such as Iosif Brodsky, as well as by the Western scholarship, like Maria Todorova.

<sup>29</sup> Kundera, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Kundera, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Kundera, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Judt, “The rediscovery of Central Europe,” *Deadalus* vol 119, no.1 (Winter, 1990): 31.

equated Central Europe with the West, arguing that the region actually belongs to Western Europe. According to Kundera, Czech, Hungarian or Polish lands were always a part of Western Europe, and only after 1945 did they become displaced to the Eastern part of the continent, “and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East.”<sup>33</sup>

An essential part of his essay is aimed at demonstrating how different Central Europe and Russia are,<sup>34</sup> and that it is a mistake to identify the artificial geopolitical divide with cultural boundaries of thousand years which places this region within the Western civilization. Central European nations are genuinely democratic and the domination of the Eastern totalitarian ideas are foreign to them, he asserted. This strong claim, probably deliberately exaggerated, was aimed to shake the Western public opinion. It was a clear appeal to the West to not forget about a territory that actually belongs to it. He tried to present the tragedy of Central Europe as a tragedy of the whole West that lost a part of its possession in the Yalta agreement.

However, Kundera not only emphasized the Western character of Central Europe, but also noticed regional similarities among Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles - nations that in his understanding constitute Central Europe. He pointed out the turbulent and fragmented history of the region. He remarked that Central European nations live in small states, whose borders are constantly redrawn, and they can never be sure of their own survival. In these observations Kundera is closer to the core argument of the discourse community than in his overall claim of being purely Western. Miłosz, Konrád, Kiš and others proclaimed the particularity of the region that is situated in the middle, in which different cultural, religious or social *limes* cross and overlap, a region with a specific mixture of languages, mentalities

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<sup>33</sup> Kundera, 1.

<sup>34</sup> He does not even use the term Soviet Union, to underline the genuine and deep rooted difference between Central Europe and its Eastern hegemon. Another Czech writer, Milan Šimečka, in reaction to Kundera’s essay, insisted on differentiating between the Soviet Union and Russia.

and systems of values. Certainly, the goal of the discourse community was to emancipate from the dominance of the Soviet Union and to demonstrate that they could not be classified simply as Easterners; nevertheless, they rarely claimed that the region was Western as such. They perceived Central Europe as a blend of different cultures, religions and ideologies. For Konrád East Central Europe was a place where Eastern and Western culture collide and intermingle.<sup>35</sup> As for Miłosz, he was particularly careful about characterizing Central Europe, perceiving the cultural boundaries as imprecise: even if the West regularly influenced this region, according to Miłosz the countries between Germany and Russia were never “pure-bred Western.”<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, members of the discourse community presented a certain supranational, Central European patriotism. Even though they underlined their attachment to the Western culture, they also manifested a peculiar regional identity. As Snel argues, they formed a true community - they were not only fellow participants in the debate, but they also shared the same fate and thought of themselves as companions in historical adversity.<sup>37</sup> Their attitude to the region is reflected also by the language they employed, often using personal pronouns to address it. For instance, Miłosz referred often to the region as “my Europe,” whereas Konrád calls it “our part of the world.”

Moreover, for the discourse community Central Europe was not only the term that delineated the region. Some were even stating that “Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion.”<sup>38</sup> It was rather a project, an act of faith or even a utopia or “a dream,” in the words of Konrád. First, as already mentioned, using the term Central Europe was aimed at emancipating the region from the Eastern Europe personified by Russia and the Soviet Union. Yet secondly, Central Europe was perceived also as a project of cooperation or even

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<sup>35</sup> Konrád, “Letter from Budapest,” 12.

<sup>36</sup> Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” 107.

<sup>37</sup> Snel, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” 101.

federation of the Central European nations. This concept had a long tradition, especially in the Polish or Czechoslovak case, however in the circumstances of being Soviet satellites it must have been a complete political fiction. Nevertheless, this idea was advanced by majority of the protagonists of the debate. For them the supranational identity was appealing, because it allowed them to avoid referring to the national community. They were aware of the threat of national chauvinism and possible conflicts between nations of the region that many of them had actually observed in the interwar period and during the Second World War. Konrád pointed out that it was in this region that both World Wars started, and urged against the “military irrationalism, wrapped in patriotic rhetoric [that] brought out our tragedy.”<sup>39</sup>

However, they also opposed the opinion that because of a constant risk of nationalism and conflicts between the little nations of Central Europe, the troublemakers should be kept in check by a guardian, such as Germany or the Soviet Empire.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Miłosz strongly asserted that there were enough “energetic minds” to resist the temptation of national chauvinism and work for the unification of Central Europe.<sup>41</sup> Dominance by a foreign empire or state was definitely not a solution for them. In order to prevent the threat of nationalism, they advocated a better understanding between the nations and pushed for cooperation at least on cultural grounds. Miłosz used the term Central Europe as a postulate to know each other better in order to avoid national conflicts. “By delineating how we all, who speak the languages within our pale, are akin, by practicing a long overdue comparative investigation of our patrimony, we can make national conflicts less likely, even if the day of one or another kind of Central European federation is distant.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, some of them searched for a supranational, regional framework, simply because they could not fully identify themselves with any of the national communities. Just to

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<sup>39</sup> György Konrád, “Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive?” *Cross Currents* 5 (1986): 117.

<sup>40</sup> Eg. Roger Portal, *Les Slaves. Peuples et nations* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1965).

<sup>41</sup> Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” 102.

<sup>42</sup> Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” 108.

mention two examples: Miłosz was born in the present-day Lithuanian town of Šeteniai (Szetejnie), then in the Russian Empire. Although raised in a Polish family and becoming a poet of the Polish language he always considered Lithuania as his homeland. As for Kiš, his mother was an Orthodox Montenegrin and his father was a Hungarian Jew. He was born in Subotica (Szabadka), which during his youth was under the rule of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then shortly governed by Hungary to finally find itself in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For them, Central Europe was a particularly appealing concept, because it transgressed the national boundaries that unavoidably constrained them. As Konrád put it, “the Central European idea can be considered a perverse fantasy, but its singularity lies in the fact that many Central Europeans need a horizon of that kind, so much broader than that of the national state.”<sup>43</sup>

Finally, Central Europe was promoted by the discourse community as a positive concept – an antithesis of Eastern Europe. They felt neglected by the West and one of the means to overcome this complex was to underline the cultural richness of their part of Europe. Kundera for instance argued that in spite of its political weakness, Central Europe in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was perhaps the greatest cultural centre of Europe, with such prominent figures as Freud, Mahler, Bartók, Kafka, Hašek, Gombrowicz, Schulz and Witkiewicz.<sup>44</sup> Miłosz emphasized the precedence of some Central European authors over the Western ones, recalling Karel Čapek as an inventor of the word “robot,” or Stanisław Witkiewicz, who wrote about totalitarian rule long before Orwell. This reminds of one of the concept of “protochronism,” which was well grounded in the intellectual tradition of the region. The term refers to claims that one was, for example, ahead of Western inventions and anticipating Western ideas, or even implies superiority over the West. However, in the case of the discourse community, it was rather a call to the West to acknowledge their cultural

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<sup>43</sup> Konrád, “Is the Dream”, 121.

<sup>44</sup> Kundera, 6.

achievements or even their very existence, which was overshadowed by the East-West political divide.

## 2.2. Criticism of the Discourse about Central Europe

The Central European debate has been approached and criticized from different angles. The most severe critique concerned the exclusivist character of the concept of Central Europe and the idea of superiority of the region over other parts of the continent, such as Russia and the Soviet Union (most often) or the Balkans (rarely), which were recognized as significantly different, and played a role of a “significant other” for Central Europe. This problem was captured for instance by a Hungarian sociologist Ferenc Miskolczi, whose claim reflects the most common allegations: “To be a Central European means to be neither an East European, nor the citizen of a Balkan state. It means to be better than the Russian, the Bulgarians, the Montenegrins. Central Europe became a program which allowed one to distinguish oneself from the ‘barbarians.’”<sup>45</sup> However, the most extensive analysis of the exclusivist traits of the Central European discourse was presented by the papers by Iver Neuman and Maria Todorova, published in the 1990s.

Iver Neumann treats the Central European debate as a political endeavour to create a collective identity and region-building: “the Central European project is first and foremost a political one.”<sup>46</sup> He perceives identity as relation, not something we have, but something that is always forming and reforming in discourse. His basic premise in this respect is the repudiation of the assumption that there is a significant difference between a national and regional project. Therefore, he disagrees with a position common to the discourse community

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<sup>45</sup> Ferenc Miskolczi (1991): 975, quoted by Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich Klaus Preuss, “Mapping Central Europe,” *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

<sup>46</sup> Neumann, 353.

that the regional (Central European) project unites, whereas national project divides. Neumann argues that the regional building process also needs a differentiation, finding a “constitutive other.” In this respect, it becomes similar to, if not the same as, the national project. Although members of the discourse community tried to avoid national chauvinism by appealing to regional identity, according to Neumann they just reproduced the national project on a supranational, regional level with all its consequences. The constitutive other was found to the East and the regional identity was built by contrasting the region with Russia or the Soviet Union. Another constitutive other could be found to the West, however it was not as obvious for many participants of the debate to treat the West as an other, because they perceived Central Europe as part of the West itself. Otherwise they referred to it as a positive, rather than a negative, other.

Neumann distinguishes however between various ways in which the participants of the debate addressed the “Eastern other.” Some of the authors, like Kundera or Mihály Vajda, treated him as morally inferior, anti-modern and as a negation of everything positive that characterizes the West. Whereas Kundera calls Russia “an other civilization,” Vajda labels it even “an other form of life.”<sup>47</sup> However, he also mentions the example of other protagonists of the debate, like Milan Šimečka, who differentiated between Russia and the Soviet Union, referring only to the political threat brought on by the latter. Šimečka noticed also that the communist regimes in the Central European countries have a local character as well, which Kundera seemed to overlook.<sup>48</sup>

Maria Todorova, similarly to Neumann, focuses mainly on the exclusivist character of the concept of Central Europe. Although the title of her paper (“Hierarchies of Eastern Europe: East-Central Europe versus the Balkans”) might suggest a focus on different ways of mapping the region, she mainly addresses the writings of the proponents of Central Europe.

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<sup>47</sup> After Neumann, 362.

<sup>48</sup> Milan Šimečka, “A World with Utopias or without Them?” *Cross Currents* 3 (1984).

Her piece is in fact a very extensive recapitulation of the debate, in which she tries to point out all the simplifications, inconsistencies and inaccuracies that the supporters of the idea of Central Europe committed.

First, she roundly criticizes some of the protagonists of the debate for their attitude towards the other. She accuses Kundera and Vajda for their exclusivist approach to the concept and their attitude to the East. Todorova exposes Kundera's demonizing vision of Russia and condemns his treatment of the country, as an "essentialized alien, an *other* civilization."<sup>49</sup> She even accuses him of being "at times outright racist."<sup>50</sup> Although Todorova acknowledges the historical context in which he wrote the essay, she concludes that "rereading Kundera after more than ten years is extremely disappointing in terms of logical consistency and moral integrity."<sup>51</sup>

In addition, Todorova is particularly sensitive about any attempt at defining Central Europe in the geographic terms. She criticizes Schöpflin for arbitrarily marking out the boundaries of Central Europe by simply including or excluding some territories from Central Europe without any justification. As an illustration, Todorova mentions a passage by Schöpflin in which he claims Croatia and Slovenia are in Central Europe, whereas other parts of the still-existing Yugoslavia (Schöpflin wrote it in 1989) are not.

She displays much more understanding for the authors who do not include geographic criteria when writing about Central Europe. She brings up the example of Csaba Kiss, who was "remarkably and honestly nonexclusive in terms of geography."<sup>52</sup> Outlining the Central European identity through literary works, Kiss included almost all the small nations of the region into his analysis (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians, Baltic peoples, Belarusians, Ukrainians, or even Finns and Greeks).

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<sup>49</sup> Todorova, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Todorova, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Todorova, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Todorova, 18.

Kiss did not perceive the difference of their literary tradition through the incompatible values with Russia, but “in the fact that Central European writers were obsessed with national ideology, and their literature was subordinated to the realization of national goals,”<sup>53</sup> which was the main interest neither in the East nor in the West. Similarly, Todorova praises Czesław Miłosz for his intellectual integrity and his avoidance of doubtful generalizations and exclusivism.

On the whole, although Todorova rightly points out many faults of the proponents of Central Europe, she seems to pick up exactly those writers and statements, that confirm her own thesis. The “honest Central Europeans” (such as Miłosz, Kiss or Hanák) are presented as exceptions of the overall racist, exclusivist and historically false discourse about Central Europe. The main difference between Neumann and Todorova is that the former treats the exclusivism and defining the group against the Other as a natural part of the identity politics and of a region-building, whereas Todorova sharply rejects it.

Understandably, the Central European discourse was also objected by the “others,” namely by Russian intellectuals, mostly those in exile. Particularly active in this debate was Iosif Brodski, Russian poet and essayist, who was actually a good friend of many Central European intellectuals, such as Miłosz. His response was very polemical. In order to retaliate against Kundera’s approach to Russia, he provocatively called Central Europe a region in Asia, precisely in “Western Asia.”<sup>54</sup> He criticized the Central European discourse of presenting a politicized and reductive view of culture.<sup>55</sup> Overall, one of the side effects of the discourse in Central Europe was that it caused some quarrels between Russian and Central European writers, which can be surprising given the similar status of dissidents or exiles that they shared.

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<sup>53</sup> Todorova, 18.

<sup>54</sup> John Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Volume 2 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Snel, 17.

Overall, around 1989 the debate was slowly losing its dynamism. Still in 1988 and 1989 two conferences in Lisbon and Budapest gathered many Central European intellectuals to discuss the regional issues. However, no subsequent conference was organized. In 1993 the last issue of *Cross Currents* was published. Although new publishing initiatives were started in the countries of the region, their existence and popularity proved to be limited. In Hungary the quarterly *Európai Utas* (European traveller), soon after its establishment in 1990 has lost its vigour. The same is true for the Polish magazine *Krasnogruda*, published by the Center Pogranicze. After reprinting the crucial texts from the debate of 1980s, both had difficulties in finding their model of operation. This was also a sign that the form of discourse on Central Europe has become to a certain extent anachronistic for the new political and cultural circumstances. This leads to the following chapter which examines how has the discourse been transformed after 1989, what are its particularities and new directions.

### 3. Discourses About Central Europe After 1989

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, in the 1980s Central Europe became a framework that served many intellectuals from the region, mainly those in exile, to put into question the Cold War division of the continent and to emancipate from being treated by the West as a part of the homogenous Eastern Bloc. The concept was also used to promote the cooperation between nations that had a long history of conflicts. Moreover, for many authors, who could hardly identify themselves with one nation-state, Central Europe also served as a larger category to frame their identity. However, throughout the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 the situation changed diametrically. Most countries of the region rejected the communist regime. Soon afterwards, they started democratization and market reforms. The Cold War bipolar division disappeared and these states quickly embarked on the integration with the Western political and economical structures. The region was gradually “leaving Eastern Europe.” What happened then with the idea of Central Europe and the discourse that it triggered? Two hypotheses come to mind.

The first assumption is that the concept of Central Europe was a useful tool in emancipating from Eastern Europe (associated with Russia or Soviet Union), however after 1989 it lost its main *raison d'être*. Countries of the region were reorienting their foreign policies westwards and the (re-)integration with the West was set as a main goal. Therefore, for the countries aiming at European integration Central Europe became a useless concept.<sup>56</sup> For instance, a leading Polish columnist Leopold Unger entitled one of his articles of the period: “How to leave Central Europe and enter Europe.”<sup>57</sup> As Czyżewski, one of the most active promoters of Central European cooperation put it: “belonging to Central Europe was

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<sup>56</sup> However, the term Central Europe was used sometimes to point out the difference with the countries from unstable regions, such as the Balkans or some of the countries of the former Soviet Union.

<sup>57</sup> Quote after: Krzysztof Czyżewski, “Powrót Europy Środkowej” [Comeback of Central Europe], in *Linia Powrotu. Zapiski z pogranicza* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2008), 47.

perceived as a danger of remaining provincial, on the margins of Europe, in times when the rush, desire, aspiration were directed towards the West.”<sup>58</sup>

According to the second assumption however, Central European discourse, developed mainly by emigrants and dissidents, can finally become a part of the official political agenda. The “Central European dream” can be materialized in regional integration, leading perhaps to a federation, and in common projects. However, these expectations remained rather unfulfilled. Indeed, some of the advocates of the idea of Central Europe became influential in the post-1989 politics and could advance the regional cooperation. This was the case of Vaclav Havel, leader of the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia, who was elected president, first of the federation and after 1993, of the Czech Republic. In Poland, Adam Michnik, one of the most prominent Polish dissidents and a promoter of regional cooperation, established the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* which has soon become the leading daily of record in Poland. Some of the Hungarian proponents of the idea joined the parties that formed the consecutive ruling teams in Hungary in the 1990s, like MDF (Csaba Gy. Kiss) or SZDSZ (György Konrád).

Nevertheless, soon after 1989, one major project for the countries of the region emerged in the foreground. The idea of the European or Euroatlantic integration became the main narrative of the post-communist countries. Joining the Western clubs was perceived as a principal strategic goal and the regional cooperation was treated at best as a pragmatic step in order to achieve the main, long desired target. Establishing such regional organizations as Visegrad Group, CEFTA or CEI was treated by their member states rather as a means for Euroatlantic integration, than a value as such. Moreover, what was characteristic for the first years of transition period in the post-communist countries was the fascination with the Western culture and lifestyle, access to which was limited until 1989.

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<sup>58</sup> Krzysztof Czyżewski, “Dialog międzykulturowy w regionie Europy Środkowej” [Intercultural dialogue in Central Europe], in *Europa Środkowa: wspólnota czy zbiorowość?*, edited by Radosław Zenderowski, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2004, 29.

Although, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the discourse on Central Europe that thrived in the 1980s was not uniform and it was characterized by a certain polyphony, there was the same emancipating denominator for virtually all the proponents. After 1989, perhaps due to the disappearance of the common threat or enemy, the concept of Central Europe has been employed in a more diverse way. Hence, this section of the thesis is aimed at identifying main directions on the use of the term in Hungary and Poland. It is composed of eight cases, demonstrating various ways of how the concept is employed, what is the specific understanding of the term in each text, and how a particular author subscribes to the idea of Central Europe. Analysis of each author is preceded by a short biographical introduction, since most of them are not particularly well-known. Moreover, it might contribute to a better understanding of the position of a particular author. Since the nationality of the authors under scrutiny does not seem to determine significantly their outlook, they are not divided according to their countries of origin.

### **Krzysztof Czyżewski – A Practitioner of the Idea of Central Europe**

Among all the authors analyzed in the thesis, Krzysztof Czyżewski is probably the only one that can be called a practitioner of the idea of Central Europe. After 1989, when this idea was losing its appeal to many, he began to implement the postulates of it in practical terms. Before that Czyżewski, a graduate of Polish literature, was an underground theatre director and performer. In 1977, he co-founded the Gardzienice Theater Company in Lublin, famous for the use of ethnographic materials in their plays. The sudden disappearance of the underground movement in 1989 cost him a personal crisis which eventually led him to a conclusion that it is time to take responsibility.<sup>59</sup> As a result, in 1991 he created Ośrodek

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<sup>59</sup> Czyżewski's biography on the website of the Polish Cultural Institute in New York. <http://www.polishculture-nyc.org/printIndex.cfm?itemcategory=30817&personDetailId=177> (read 20.05.2012).

“Pogranicze – sztuk, kultur, narodów” (the Center “Borderland of Arts, Cultures and Nations”) in Sejny, a little town near to the Polish-Lithuanian border and committed himself to the regional cooperation based on a organic work.

Gradually, Pogranicze has become one of the most interesting cultural endeavours in the post-1989 Poland, initiating a variety of activities. On the one hand, the Center has engaged in intercultural projects on the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, contributing to the reconciliation of two nations. On the other hand, it has dealt with the borderland in a broader sense – Pogranicze brought its own model of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue to other parts of the region, like Bosnia for instance. The centre also contributed to an opening of Polish readership to the literature from the region. The publishing house run by Pogranicze issued many translations of prose and essayism from the wider Central European region, stretching from Lithuania to Albania.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from an everyday activity of managing the Centre, Czyżewski explained his philosophy of working in the borderlands and his understanding of Central Europe in many essays and articles. He treats the term Central Europe in a broad way. What is the constitutive feature of Central Europe is its multiculturalism. Therefore, he urges not to treat Central Europe as a entity consisting of former Habsburg countries, but also to include the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which comprises the present territories of Belarus, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as some parts of Estonia, Moldova, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. To describe this vast region, he uses most often the term Central Europe, occasionally describing the region as Other Europe or Middle Europe,<sup>61</sup> however without altering the meaning.

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<sup>60</sup> Among the authors published by Pogranicze are: Ivan Čolović, Drago Jančar, Dževad Karahasan, Fatos Lubonja, Claudio Magris, Norman Manea, Predgar Matvejević, Bohdan Osadczyk, István Szilágyi, Josef Škvorecký, Tomas Venclova, Pavel Vilikovský. Majority of them are presented to the Polish readership for the first time.

<sup>61</sup> In Polish *Europa Środką* – difficult to translate into English literarily, it means more less “Europe of the centre” or “Middle Europe.”

Including to Central Europe the multinational heritage of *Rzeczpospolita* makes him an heir of the Miłosz tradition which Czyżewski openly endorses.

However, he does not take the term Central Europe for granted. In his essay “Comeback of Central Europe,” Czyżewski talks with a fictitious figure of an elderly man in a restaurant in Graz. This dialogic structure allows him to present his own concerns and doubts about the concept of Central Europe: isn’t the concept anachronistic as such? Whether being a Central European is not in fact an anti-European stance and referring to an ‘intact and pure’ Central Europe a means to oppose integration and unification? Is the concept of Central Europe yet another embodiment of the romantic messianism, as we hear some intellectuals saying that “only we are the ones who preserved the spirit and true values of the European heritage, which got lost elsewhere?”<sup>62</sup> After presenting his reservations to the concept of Central Europe, he still finds the term useful for his undertakings, which is also reflected by the title of his text - “Comeback of Central Europe.” Czyżewski considers the “idea of Central Europe as an utopia, if we consider it as a an opportunity to create a certain common political-economical-cultural structure in the region. Here, all the supranational initiatives are weak and less attractive than similar European initiatives.”<sup>63</sup> However, it is an important project if we descend to a lower level. What is needed, according to Czyżewski, is a grass-root cooperation, an organic effort to build new relations, to learn about each other and to start the dialogue between peoples of the Central European countries.

Moreover, Czyżewski needs the concept of Central Europe to describe his identity which transgresses the national framing. He rejects however the assumption that these two levels of identity – national and regional – exclude each other. “Central Europe is my home, because other configurations are sometimes too restricted. For me Central Europe is a deeper breath, a wider cultural and civilization context. But I would not be a citizen [of Central

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<sup>62</sup> Czyżewski, “Powrót Europy Środkowej,” 45.

<sup>63</sup> Czyżewski, “Powrót Europy Środkowej,” 52.

Europe], if I did not have my national identity.”<sup>64</sup> Czyżewski finds in Central Europe a particular ethos of a borderland, a culture of dialogue which is close to his worldview.

Czyżewski also defines Central Europe as a provincial territory. Being provincial causes the complex of inferiority, but can also generate a positive force to create something new. He perceives the region as “firmly devastated, remaining aside the main course of events in the world, full of mysteries and unresolved issues from the past.”<sup>65</sup> It is characterized by instability, lack of continuity; he even calls it once “the world after the end of the world.”<sup>66</sup> As the end of the world he perceives the tragic 20<sup>th</sup> century, which upset the traditional multiculturalism of these lands. Yet, although Poland is nowadays a fairly homogenous state, in its borderline regions we can find a multitude of cultures and the complexity of historical disputes between different nations. Therefore, he treats the provincialism of Central Europe rather as an asset, than a weakness.

### **Péter Esterházy – A Sceptic and a Proponent of Central Europe in One**

Péter Esterházy is among the authors with the most complex and ambivalent attitude to the concept of Central Europe. He is one of the greatest living Hungarian writers, translated into countless languages. His books received numerous awards, for instance the Angelus prize for his *opus magnum* published in 2000 “*Harmonia Caelestis*,” which is a great literary play with the European and Hungarian history, as well as with the aristocratic ancestry of the writer. His postmodern style is characterized by an extensive use of intertextuality, allusiveness and irony. These features are typical not only for his novels, but also for his essayism. Especially after 1989 it became an important part of Esterházy’s works, dealing

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<sup>64</sup> Czyżewski, “Dialog międzykulturowy,” 34.

<sup>65</sup> Krzysztof Czyżewski, “Czas prowincji” [Time for the province], in *Linia Powrotu. Zapiski z pogranicza* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2008), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Krzysztof Czyżewski, “Kompleks Atlantydy, czyli Europa Środkowa po końcu świata” [The Atlantis Complex or Central Europe after the end of the world], in *Linia Powrotu. Zapiski z pogranicza* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2008), 71.

mainly with literature, yet also touching upon politics and public issues in general. His articles and essays are gathered mainly in three volumes: *Egy kékharisnya följegyzéseiből* (Notes of a Bluestocking, 1994), *Egy kék haris* (Blue Corncrake, 1996) and *A szabadság nehéz mámora* (In a Hard Daze of Freedom, 2004). In all these books, Esterházy often reflects on the regional identity and reveals his attitude towards the idea of Central Europe. Notwithstanding, it is sometimes extremely hard to elicit his views on Central Europe. Esterházy's essays and articles are often ambiguous, very ironical and often they reveal his doubts about the concept, rather than concrete opinions and postulates.

When it comes to the terminology, Esterházy uses both terms, Central Europe and Eastern Europe interchangeably, however the notion of Central Europe is more often encountered in his essays. He does not value one term over the other, saying that Central Europe is in fact Eastern Europe that became fashionable.<sup>67</sup> When he employs the regional term, it is not to refer to any of the historical entities, it is rather to reflect on the region as a territory united by the communist experience and the following transition process. It is not clear which lands are included in his understanding of Central/Eastern Europe, but what seems to be the common denominator is the period of living under communism.

Esterházy participated in the debate with other intellectuals from the region already in the 1980s, however always expressing his reservation about the concept. He is probably the most critical about the idea of Central Europe among the authors analyzed in the thesis, pointing out mainly its imperfections and shortcomings. He emphasizes the risks of exclusivism of the concept, as well as the simplistic approach of glorifying the uniqueness of the region in order to appease inferiority complexes. Esterházy ridicules the slogans that were employed *ad nauseam* in the Central European discourse: “laboratory of freedom,” “empire of

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<sup>67</sup> Péter Esterházy, „Úgy kell rúgni, művészkém!” [That's how we kick, my dear artist], in *A szabadság nehéz mámora. Válogatott esszék, cikkek, 1996–2003* (Budapest: Magvető, 2004), 102.

greyness,” “second-class Europe,” “deficiency that one can build on,” “Centráljuropdrím.”<sup>68</sup> He portrays a Central European as a masochist, whose sentiment of being oppressed has so much become a part of the identity that he feels particularly good when beaten and humiliated. „A Central European was always unobtrusively prideful of being oppressed which is a feeling that a Westerner indeed had no idea of.”<sup>69</sup>

Esterházy admits that people in Central Europe suffered greatly, however dismisses a certain superiority displayed often by Central Europeans, summarized by a phrase “only a Central European can understand Central Europe.” For Esterházy, Central Europeaness means that we actually do not understand ourselves. He rejects as a result the approach that prevailed in the 1980s of glorifying the past and elevating the Central European culture above the Western one. Especially while “we don’t leave any more in an unparalleled obscene joke of history, but in a normal, very average, pallid country.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, he rejects megalomania that he perceives typical for many Central European intellectuals.

Nevertheless, in his later essay, Esterházy comes back to the concept and admits that it reveals some positive connotations for him. He observes that perceiving Central Europe as a dream („as some distinguished Central Europe’s expert said, probably Kundera or Konrád, or both of them”<sup>71</sup>) was not only a beautiful and witty idea, but it is also a very constructive one. Once again he argues that in the communist period the main word describing the Central European countries was “a lie.” The national community was based on it and Central Europe emerged as a good alternative to a collective “we” which was based on a lie. “Finally something depends on us, on our fantasies, on our talents. We can dream here about freedom. Then – and that’s my point – we could regain our lost ‘we’. We, Central Europeans, can try

<sup>68</sup> Péter Esterházy, “Bohóctréfa” [Clown’s joke], in *Egy kékharisnya följegyzéseiből* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1994), 277.

<sup>69</sup> Péter Esterházy, “A másként nőtt sejtek” [Cells grow differently], in *Egy kékharisnya följegyzéseiből* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1994), 197.

<sup>70</sup> Esterházy, “A másként nőtt sejtek,” 197.

<sup>71</sup> Péter Esterházy, “Közép-Európa mint seb, homály, hiba, esély és reménytelenség” [Central Europe as a wound, vagueness, mistake, chance and despondency], *Helikon* 14 (2009).

first, and then it will be easier to say: we Hungarians, we Slovenians, we Serbians etc.” Hence, he is more eager to reconstruct the community within a larger and more neutral regional framework, then the national one with all its burden.

### **Aleksander Fiut – Central European Identity in Literature**

Aleksander Fiut uses the concept of Central Europe in order to continue the debate on the identity of Central Europe started in the 1980s. However, he also adds a contemporary dimension to this issue, reflecting on the current cultural and literary trends in the region. His works are definitely influenced by the perspective of Czesław Miłosz. Fiut, a literary historian and critic from Krakow, is one of the most renowned experts on the Miłosz’ oeuvre and privately was a friend of the poet. A significant part of Fiut’s research is dedicated to the question of Central Europe. His essays and lectures on identity of Central European writers and how did it change throughout the last turbulent century, are assembled in three volumes: *Pytanie o tożsamość* [Asking about Identity], *Być (albo nie być) Środkowoeuropejczykiem* [Be (or not to be) Central European] and *Spotkania z Innym* [Encounters with the Other]. Although most of the essays included in this triptych are literary criticism about the contemporary - mostly Polish, but also regional – literature, they also reveal a particular approach of Fiut to the concept of Central Europe.

Fiut is quite consequent in his terminology. He uses almost exclusively the notion of Central Europe. Although he does not specify the scope of the term, it can be deduced from his depiction of the region that he subscribes to a wide definition of Central Europe. In *Być (albo nie być) Środkowoeuropejczykiem* he describes Central Europe as a region, where different borders overlap and meander capriciously.

“If we imagine a physical map of whole Europe, on which someone puts transparent plates, marking respectively – influence of Rome and Byzantium, Latin and Old Church Slavonic

languages, Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox, contours of borders of fallen kingdoms and past empires, location of particular national groups and religious clusters, not to mention the reach of communism – at a certain point lines will begin to blur and muddle. It is no doubt here. Where the biggest entanglement and density is found, it is where Central Europe is.”<sup>72</sup>

Hence, he underlines the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of the region which reminds of Kundera’s passage about the greatest variety within the smallest place. His Central Europe is therefore a vaguely limited area and it is reflected in the geographical scope of his research. Although Fiut deals mainly with Polish writers, he usually tries to put their works into a larger perspective, which is a broadly understood Central Europe. The use of this wide definition of the region allows him to then bring up authors from different corners of Central Europe, from the Lithuanian Tomas Venclova to the Yugoslavian Danilo Kiš.

His reading of the literature of the region allows him to identify three main problems that a Central European has to cope with. *First*, it is a periphery complex. A feeling of being provincial is a consequence of a long period of domination and dependence from foreign empires (Russian, Prussian, Austro-Hungarian). As a result of the peripheral thinking, the Central European cultural elites tend to copy with no further reflection the patterns from the West, perceived as a civilization model – “from Paris, Vienna, or recently from the United States.”<sup>73</sup> *Second*, it is a sense of flexibility of borders. This painful feeling concerns state, social and cultural boundaries. It is an outcome of colonial rule in this region and constantly changing borders during last few centuries. *Third*, connected to the previous two problems, is the phenomenon of the problematic identity which constantly has to be redefined.

According to Fiut, these problems might turn into an asset or, to the contrary, they can provoke very negative developments. On the one hand a constant revision of one’s identity can be a very fruitful endeavour. Referring to the past multinational empires, “preserved in

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<sup>72</sup> Aleksander Fiut, *Być (albo nie być) Środkowoeuropejczykiem* [Be (Or not to be) Central European], (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 8.

<sup>73</sup> Aleksander Fiut, “Widziane ze środka Europy” [Seen from the Centre of Europe], in *Spotkania z Innym* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 247.

the memory of Central Europeans,” can bring up the patterns of harmonious co-existence of different cultures, indispensable in the globalised reality of today. Here Austro-Hungary or Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth can serve as an example. On the other hand, the sense of periphery can easily transform itself into “a cultural isolationism, deceitful proud of everything that is vernacular, not yielding foreign influences, together with odious contempt for culture of the closest neighbours.”<sup>74</sup> Problematic identity and a need for self-identification can finally “wake the demons of nationalism, chauvinism and racism.” According to Fiut, a dreadful example of this we could observe in former Yugoslavia.

Interestingly, Fiut does not only concentrate on the violent past of Central Europe, but also points at threats that are common for the region in the post-1989 period.

“Central-Eastern Europe experienced in the last century an invasion of two, unknown so far in this region, opposing forms of civilization: one created by totalitarianism, both in its fascist and communist variant, another created by free market, with the early phase of globalization.”<sup>75</sup>

Here, he observes not only the economical consequences, but mainly the cultural developments that occurred in the region. “Paradoxically, a Central European seems to be better prepared to adopt homogenous pulp of the mass culture, than a Western European. He experienced during the communism its own, rustic version, repeating the Soviet patterns.”<sup>76</sup>

Thus, Fiut raises concerns about losing the particularity and the vernacular character of the culture in Central Europe which, after being dominated by one imperialism, now is exposed to another form of it, even if it is now less oppressive and not based on coercion.

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<sup>74</sup> Fiut, “Widziane ze środka Europy,” 249.

<sup>75</sup> Aleksander Fiut, “Wstęp” [Introduction], in *Spotkania z Innym* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Fiut, “Widziane ze środka Europy,” 245.

## Lajos Grendel – Central Europe Versus History

Lajos Grendel uses the concept of Central Europe mainly in order to refer to the complicated history of the region, composed of numerous nations, mingled on a limited territory. Which is in fact a story about himself, being a member of Hungarian minority in a neighbouring country. Although Grendel has always lived in Slovakia (first in his hometown Levice, then in Bratislava), he is considered as one of the best writers of Hungarian language. Apart from his prose, he recently wrote an excellent volume on contemporary Hungarian literature. For many years he worked at Kalligram – a Hungarian publishing house, based both in Budapest and Bratislava, engaged in promoting Central European literature.

In the essay *Közép-Európa és kísértetei* [Central Europe and its phantoms], his definition of Central Europe is very explicit. Even though it seems to be deliberately exaggerated, it presents well Grendel's understanding of Central Europe:

“1. Central Europe is a region which can be attacked any time from each part of the world. 2. Central Europe is populated by Central Europeans, but very often foreign armies are stationed on its territory. 3. A Central European is very sensitive about his origins and nationality. 4. A Central European, on a regular basis, according to a certain historical algorithm, is conquered; I would say even more, he is permanently oppressed. 5. That is why, a Central European is more prone to anxiety and paranoia than a non-Central European. 6. For some time already, Central Europe is composed of little states, that is why Central Europeans are more affected by claustrophobia than others. 7. These little states are poor. 8. The identity of a Central European indigenous people was constantly questioned in the last seventy or eighty years. 9. A Central European would also like to be successful, well-off, respected and happy, but it is especially at home that he has the smallest chance to achieve it.”<sup>77</sup>

As he declares, this list is based on the literature on Central Europe and his own experience. Grendel perceives this region as a unique territory, with such particularities as the fragility of states, the experience of regular invasions and poverty. He writes about the difficulties that a citizen of Central Europe experiences and the hardships of everyday life. However, some of

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<sup>77</sup> Lajos Grendel, “Közép-Európa és kísértetei” [Central Europe and its phantoms], in Hazám, Abszurdisztán, (Pozsony: Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 1998), 5-6.

the statements are evidently ironical. The writer does not perceive a Central European exclusively as an innocent victim. A typical inhabitant of the region is often excessively anxious and paranoiac and the conditions in which he lives make him oversensitive about his identity. Grendel does not justify the defects of a Central European, but tries to explain the causes of his weakness.

As an example for the above-quoted list of features of Central Europe and its inhabitants, the author recounts the story of a fictive Schmidt family from Košice. In his narrative, Mr and Mrs Schmidt, representing a typical Central European family, do not seem to be the actors of history. Instead, they are objects that experience different events occurring independently from their decisions. Various armies come and go (Czechs, Hungarians, Germans, and Russians) and the Schmidts get used to an uncertainty they have to live with. When in 1991 old Mister Schmidt tells his wife that the Russians are gone, she simply replies with a question: “and who has come instead?”<sup>78</sup>

If they try to oppose their fate, they are punished. When Mr Schmidt gets irritated by a persistent questioning by the representative of the census bureau whether he is Hungarian or Slovakian, he eventually answers that he is of “Košice nationality”. And as a consequence, he loses his job. Neither does the opportunistic attitude make their life easier. The Schmidts send their two sons to two different schools: one is Slovakian and the other Hungarian. This move determines all the future choices of two brothers. The older marries a Slovakian girl, changes his name to Kowalski,<sup>79</sup> and during the Second World War joins the Slovak communist partisans. Meanwhile, the younger changes his name to a more Hungarian Kovácspataky, becomes a member of the Hungarian national party and eventually flees with his family to Hungary. The well-intentioned decision of the parents inadvertently made two brothers enemies. Or the complicated historical circumstances led to a family drama? Anyway, the

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<sup>78</sup> Grendel, “Közép-Európa és kísértetei,” 6.

<sup>79</sup> Slovakian equivalent of the name Schmidt.

story of the family shows the tragic circumstances that characterized the history of Central Europe in 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a period when

“a Central European could be oppressed for any reason. Because he was poor or because he was rich; for being a Hungarian, a Slovak, a Czech or a Pole; for being a Jew or a Christian. Who was oppressed and why changed every fifteen or twenty years, or sometimes even more frequently. One is not a Central European if at least once in a lifetime he is not oppressed.”<sup>80</sup>

In this short biography of the Schmidt family, Grendel shows the turbulent and unpredictable history of Central Europe. And that is what constitutes Central Europe in Grendel’s perspective – uncertain borders, changing citizenships, transit of ideologies, as well as invasions by foreign armies. “Mister Schmidt and his wife are to the core Central Europeans. During their long life they were twice Hungarian, twice Czechoslovak for shorter or longer time, to finally die as Slovak citizens [...]. They got a taste of democracy, fascism and communism.”<sup>81</sup> In this way, Grendel perceives also himself as a Central European.

In the essay *Közép-Európai polgár* [Central European citizen]<sup>82</sup> Grendel particularly emphasizes the communist past as a constitutive feature of Central Europe. The communist rule is responsible for creating a wide gap between this region and Western Europe. He defines Central Europe as a group of post-communist states between European Union and former Soviet Union, restricted by the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black seas. It is composed of small states, nations and national minorities. Its backwardness comparing to the West grew even bigger during the communist experiment. It is characterized by the multiculturalism, by hidden (or not) conflicts, and chronic identity crisis.<sup>83</sup> Yet, Grendel does not see major cultural differences between various parts of Europe: “I can call Confucius a Chinese philosopher, but it would be ridiculous, if I call Kant a North Eastern European philosopher,

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<sup>80</sup> Grendel, “Közép-Európa és kísértetei,” 7-8.

<sup>81</sup> Grendel, “Közép-Európa és kísértetei,” 7.

<sup>82</sup> Lajos Grendel, “Közép-Európai polgár” [Central European citizen], in *Hazám, Abszurdisztán*, 43-52. Pozsony: Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 1998.

<sup>83</sup> Grendel, “Közép-Európai polgár,” 48.

in contrast with Descartes – a Western European one.”<sup>84</sup> The main difference between the two parts of Europe is that one experienced the communist experiment, and the other did not. Overall, his writings on Central Europe are focused on the historical adversity of the region and the sense of uncertainty and problematic identity of a Central European.

### **Csaba Gy. Kiss – How to Preserve the Nation and Go Beyond it at the Same Time**

Csaba Gy. Kiss is a Hungarian scholar in literature and cultural history, who for many years dealt with the relations between different nations in Central Europe. Interestingly, he was also a conservative politician and a co-founder of Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum) in 1987. Although he left the party politics in 1993, he often expresses his support for the conservative parties, recently for the ruling right-wing Fidesz. This actually differentiates him from rest of the authors analyzed here, who are rather politically indifferent, or leaning liberal. During his academic career he spent many years lecturing at various universities in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Croatia and speaks most of the Central European languages. Kiss wrote extensively on the connections of Hungarian literature and culture with Poland, Slovakia and Croatia in particular, as well as on nationalism and nation-building in Central Europe. The broadest collection of his works on Central Europe which demonstrates his approach to the concept has been somewhat surprisingly assembled in a volume published in Poland, under a very telling title „Lesson of Central Europe.” It includes more than twenty of his texts, some of them dealing directly with the concept of Central Europe, others represent his cultural and literary studies of the region. Actually, some of them were written originally in Polish by Kiss which shows the rooting of his works also in the Polish tradition.

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<sup>84</sup> Grendel, “Közép-Európai polgár,” 47.

Kiss already in 1980s joined a group of admirers of the concept of Central Europe.<sup>85</sup> In this period he began using the Central European framework, primarily in order to refer to the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. What was already then particular for Kiss, is that he perceived Central Europe as a territory with a dense mixture of nations, yet including not only Greater Hungary or Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also the lands of the Polish Commonwealth and the former Ottoman possessions in the Balkans. It was a less typical approach in Hungary, where Central Europe was most often identified with the former Habsburg lands. Throughout Kiss' works Central Europe has been usually loosely defined as territories between German and Russian linguistic areas, alternatively as an area between three seas: Baltic, Adriatic and Black. He also uses alternatively the terms Central Europe and East-Central Europe. Interestingly, particularly in his contributions intended for Polish readers, he tends to submit to a more popular term especially in the Polish historiography, that is Central-Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, occasionally he employs the term Central Europe in order to describe some peculiarities of the Austro-Hungarian legacy, in a way more typical for the Hungarian longing for the K.u.K. In the essay *Közép-Európa és az ő jelképei* [Central Europe and its symbols], he facetiously points out that "it is possible that the symbols of Central Europe are to be found in the realm of pastry,"<sup>86</sup> recalling for instance Hungarian *rétes*, found elsewhere under the name of *štrudla* or *strudel*. Or in the particular atmosphere of the coffee houses, that one can still encounter in Budapest, Vienna, Prague, Zagreb or Trieste. Nonetheless, these nostalgic passages constitute definitely a minor part of his works.

In Kiss' essays and scholarly publications he traces various common features of Central Europe. He examined for instance the image of the nation in the national anthems of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia,

<sup>85</sup> His role in the Central European debate is mentioned in the second subsection of the second chapter.

<sup>86</sup> Csaba Gy. Kiss, "Közép-Európa és az ő jelképei," [Central Europe and its symbols] in *A morva himnusz* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2009), 51.

Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.<sup>87</sup> What he found, is that they persistently refer to the past tragedies, defeats or dominance of foreign powers, as well as to a desire of regaining the independence. One of his main concerns is to describe the particular nation-building process in the region. Here, he emphasizes the different paths of developing nationalism in the West and in East-Central Europe.

Whether it is called Central or East-Central Europe, these terms have an unequivocal positive meaning. For instance, he perceives the borderline character of Central Europe as a great asset.

“In a wider sense, the European belt stretching between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black sea, is also a borderline. It is neither East, nor West, but East and West at the same time. With its rich multicolour of people, cultures, languages and religions it [Central Europe] constitutes a special value.”<sup>88</sup>

Following this passage written in 1993, Kiss suggests that this unique experience of the region could be an interesting lesson for the rest of the continent. He emphasizes the positive features of the region which can serve as an example to others.

What is a recurring theme in the Kiss' essays is his attempts to reconcile the national projects with the peaceful coexistence of the nations in the mixed area of Central Europe. He postulates the creation of a collective memory and common symbols for Central Europe. The common Central European pantheon could contribute to a “spiritual integration of Europe.” He argues that Central European myths, especially those that set one nation against another, should not be neglected and forgotten, but presented together. Such “panorama” could for instance put together Czech, Hungarian and Croatian leaders of revolutions of 1848 who fought for freedom in opposing camps and present their perspectives at once. In this way the national mythologies could be relativized. Furthermore, he calls to search for and promote the

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<sup>87</sup> Csaba Gy. Kiss, *Hol vagy, hazám? Kelet-Közép-Európa himnuszai. Egy nemzeti jelkép történetéhez* [Homeland, where are you? East-Central European anthems. History of the national symbol] (Nap Kiadó, 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Csaba Gy. Kiss, *Lekcja Europy Środkowej. Eseje i szkice* [Lesson of Central Europe. Essays and sketches] (Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2009), 195.

events and ideas that unite Central European nations. As an example, he brings up the political thinkers that advocated the regional integration, such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Milan Hodža, Stjepan Radić, Oszkár Jászi and Józef Piłsudski. Their ideas are hardly known outside their national contexts and in Kiss' opinion they should be promoted in Central Europe as well as in the whole continent. All in all, the endeavour of constructing a common historical memory is, according to Kiss, a long overdue task for the region: "We, Hungarians, Slovaks, Poles, Czechs and others, are representatives of a our common past, and for this past, for our heritage, and especially for its interpretation, we are responsible."<sup>89</sup>

### **Robert Makłowicz – Nostalgic Central European**

At a first glance, Makłowicz seem to be the most unusual choice among the authors analyzed in this thesis: a television personality, culinary critic, until recently known in Poland especially for his very popular *Podróże Kulinarne Roberta Makłowicza* (Robert Makłowicz's Culinary Travels) show. However, Makłowicz is also a graduate of history, a journalist and in 2010 he presented himself as an absorbing travel writer. In his book *Café Museum*<sup>90</sup>, cuisine is in fact a point of departure to reflect on history and culture of Central Europe. As Krzysztof Varga put it,

"Cafe Museum is indeed a book about craving and thirst, yet above all it is an excursion to the mysterious Mitteleuropa, more complicated and extraordinary, than any other invented lands ever. And from which we, Central Europeans, originate. Because in fact there are no real Poles, Slovaks and Hungarians, all the more Austrians – there are only true Central Europeans. Like Robert Makłowicz."<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, Makłowicz describes himself as a Central European, since he can hardly identify with one single nationality. "Actually, I can be a Pole, a Hungarian, a Croatian, a Galician Jew, a Transylvanian Saxon or Swabian, I can be a Czech or a Ruthenian, a Boyko, a

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<sup>89</sup> Kiss, *Lekcja Europy Środkowej*, 156.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Makłowicz, *Café Museum* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2010).

<sup>91</sup> From the cover of *Café Museum*.

Hutsul, a Lemko too [...]. My genes bear the multinational legacy of the old *Rzeczpospolita* and the Habsburg Monarchy.”<sup>92</sup> Although a Pole by birth, Makłowicz has a mixed Hungarian, Armenian, Ruthenian and Austrian background, that is why he seeks for a wider frame for his identity than the ethnically and religiously homogenous contemporary Poland. Makłowicz reveals a particular nostalgia to the K.u.K. monarchy. Not only because most of his ancestors were citizens of the monarchy. He comes from Kraków, which itself was a part of Austro-Hungary until 1918 and where after 1989 a kind of Habsburg nostalgia became widespread in certain circles. Makłowicz proudly underlines that his secondary school was established during the “gracious reign” of Franz Joseph I. The author even named his younger son Ferdynand Franciszek, in honour of the Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Therefore, for Makłowicz the German term *Mitteleuropa* does not bring up any negative association. It rather signifies the idealized multiculturalism which he misses in the context of today’s nation-states of the region. He actually uses two terms – Central Europe and *Mitteleuropa* – interchangeably, and both refer mainly to the territories of Austria-Hungary. For Makłowicz, when one becomes aware of the old bonds, he can realize that not only he is a member of his tribe, but he “gains a sense of belonging to a bigger family, which in addition is multilingual and multi-religious – to a Central European community.”<sup>93</sup> Although he is aware that the very existence of this family is a utopia, he eagerly subscribes to it. “I’m a Central European of Polish nationality,”<sup>94</sup> as he declares in one of the interviews.

He praises in particular the multiculturalism of Central Europe which vanished to a large extent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When travelling around Transylvania, he notices that despite the madness of Ceaușescu rule, fortunately this part of Romania remained a multiethnic territory. Makłowicz perceives it as one of the last such parts of Central Europe,

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<sup>92</sup> Makłowicz, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Makłowicz, 37.

<sup>94</sup> „O dobry Panie Mitteleuropa,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4.10.2010, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8543285,O\\_dobry\\_Panie\\_Mitteleuropa\\_.html?as=1&startsz=x](http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8543285,O_dobry_Panie_Mitteleuropa_.html?as=1&startsz=x) [read 17.05.2012].

since other parts were “crushed with the twentieth century’s national roller.”<sup>95</sup> With undisguised pleasure he refers to the Transylvanian cities enumerating their multiple names in different languages (eg. Alba Iulia, Gyulafehérvár, Weißenburg, Karlsburg). As he claims, “although Polish is my mother tongue, I like the best to hear different languages around me. I enjoy when in one place there are temples of different religions, I’m even happier, if they are all open.”<sup>96</sup>

He also refers of course to cuisine as a particular feature of Central Europe. In *Café Museum* he mentions, for instance, pickled cabbage stewed with pork, known by Austrians and Czechs as *segediner Goulash*, whereas in Hungary as *székelygulyás* or *székelykaposzta*. The other examples brought along by the writer are: *knödel* or *knedle*, *strudel*, *spritzer* or *gemišt*. However, Makłowicz enumerates many more Central European dishes in one of his previous books, *CK kuchnia* (K.u.K cuisine), unlike *Café Museum* devoted exclusively to cuisine. Similarly to many authors pining for the old monarchy, he refers to the words of Hrabal that Central Europe is where you can find these typical Austro-Hungarian railway stations. So Makłowicz accordingly refers to Przemyśl, Split, Stanisławów (Ivano-Frankivsk) and Chernivtsi, the stations of which remind of those in Vienna and Budapest.

Finally, Makłowicz finds Central Europe simply much more interesting than the Western part of the continent. He prefers Sarajevo to Paris, railroad through the Dinaric Alps to the journey in Swiss Alps, Dalmatian seaside to Spanish or Italian coast. Firstly, these places bring to him the memories of the former states that he yearns for, secondly these are the territories where he finds the old mixture of cultures that is unknown in the West.

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<sup>95</sup> Makłowicz, 68.

<sup>96</sup> Makłowicz, 12.

## Andrzej Stasiuk – “Private” Central Europe

Andrzej Stasiuk devoted to the region a large part of his writing. This prolific Polish author is famous especially for his travelogues, in particular for the essayistic book *Jadąc do Babadag* which appeared in English with the even more telling title - *On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe*. Stasiuk is fascinated by the provincial part of the continent which is not yet transformed by the global mass culture and seems immune to modernization. Apart from his travel writing in the region, Stasiuk together with his wife Monika Sznajderman established in 1996 Czarne publishing house, specializing in Central European prose, essayism and reportage, with its leading series *Other Europe, Other Literature*. Along the Pogranicze publishing house of Krzysztof Czyżewski, Czarne published many works of contemporary literature from the region and triggered the interest in the countries and cultures neighbouring Poland and nowadays it is one of the major Polish publishing houses.

Stasiuk rarely uses the term Central Europe itself. Probably in order to avoid all the ballast of the debate about this concept of Central Europe, he tends to use such synonyms, as Other Europe, Middle Europe (“Europa Środka”) or “my Europe.” More eagerly he uses the term “a Central European” to describe the inhabitant of this region. Stasiuk avoids generalizing about the region: “[my Europe] is composed of details, trifles, events that lasted a few seconds.”<sup>97</sup> He presents a completely “private” view of Central Europe, characterized by the personal pronoun “my” (“my Central Europe” or simply “my Europe”). He does not even pretend to give an objective definition of the region. Instead, he delimitates “his” Europe with a pair of compasses. He places the spike in Wołowiec (a town in South-Eastern Poland), the place where he currently lives and where he intends to stay. He puts another part of the

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<sup>97</sup> Andrzej Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy” [Logbook], in *Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej środkową*, Jurij Andruchowycz and Andrzej Stasiuk (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2000), 134.

compass in Warsaw, where he was born. Then he makes a circle and everything which is inside constitutes “his Central Europe”, including: “a piece of Belarus, quite a lot of Ukraine, decent and comparable parts of Romania and Hungary, almost the entire surface of Slovakia and a strip of Czech Republic. As well as one third of the Homeland.”<sup>98</sup> In this arbitrary way he marks out “his” Central Europe.

Secondly, in contrast to the discourse on Central Europe already well-known from 1980s, he does not underline the cultural refinement of the region which would legitimize the “European” character of it. He presents a sort of anti-mythology of Central Europe, or a new mythology that opposes the previous ones. He writes about the chaos and imperfection of Central Europe which paradoxically appeals a lot to him. He praises the provinciality of the region and its immunity to change.

However, some traits of the Central European debate also resonate in his writings - namely the turbulent history of the region. Stasiuk portrays himself as an inhabitant of the Central European plain, whose instinct pushed him to flee to the mountains. He makes a reservation though that not every inhabitant of the Central European plain has this instinct, nor everyone that has it will necessarily listen to it. Nevertheless, in his own case, he could not stand a constant drought of the Mazowsze plain, and had to escape to the mountains in Southern Poland, to a place where he feels safer. However, the drought in Central Europe is not only caused, in his opinion, by a regular wind. Stasiuk writes about a metaphorical wind of history, which blows “in this or that direction, but is always here.”<sup>99</sup> His escape is therefore not only his esthetical choice, but also it signifies a flight from the Central European brutal history which constantly oppresses the population of this region.

Stasiuk, similarly to Miłosz, for instance, perceives as one of the main features of the region, a different understanding of the notions of history and time between a Central

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<sup>98</sup> Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy,” 86.

<sup>99</sup> Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy,” 89.

European and a Westerner. “When I take a man from the West to this [deserted] area<sup>100</sup> and try to explain to him that he is walking through a crowded and loud village, he cannot believe that I’m telling the story about what happened fifty, not five hundred years ago.”<sup>101</sup> This region, says Stasiuk, was particularly experienced by history. It is an area where only “conditional sentences” are appropriate – nothing is given and nothing is forever.<sup>102</sup> The Central Europeans are therefore uncertain of what will happen. For instance, the writer recalls his conversations with a neighbour who is a Lemko. His family was deported in 1947 to various places in western Poland. He says that people there still live out of a suitcase. In formerly German houses, on German soil, never completely sure who owns the land. Especially if the land was taken and given to them in exchange of another land which was plundered. This kind of micro-histories forms a picture of the region in Stasiuk’s essays.

Despite all the tragic history of the region (or perhaps the other way around: because of it), Stasiuk perceives Central Europe as something more exciting, appealing to emotions, as opposed to the West, where cities are made out of glass, everything is clean and well-organized. It is particularly visible when he compares his two train journeys: one to Bremerhaven in Germany, another to Burkut in Ukraine, through Hungary. He does not remember the first trip in a clean, quiet German wagon, however he recalls all the details of the second trip, seeing some young boys fighting, a slim woman travelling with a large bottle of oil and experiencing other peculiar things that kept happening. For Stasiuk, Central Europe is chaotic, disintegrated and incoherent, and precisely because of that, this region is surprising and intriguing.

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<sup>100</sup> Stasiuk refers here to the ruined villages in Beskid Niski in southern Poland, where almost no signs of human settlement remain. In the 1947-1950 Polish communist authorities resettled about 200,000 people mainly from Ukrainian ethnic groups (Lemkos, Boykos) to the territories in the West that were ceded to Poland by the decision of Yalta Conference in 1945.

<sup>101</sup> Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy,” 96.

<sup>102</sup> Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy,” 96.

Finally, Stasiuk also plays with the stereotypes that the West displays towards the *Other Europe*. Writing shortly after the so-called Eastern enlargement of the EU, he ridiculed the fears that a Westerner possess towards the other, less known part of the continent.

“That’s how more or less the plan for the following decades looks like: Gypsies will come and put up their camps on Champs-Élysées, Bulgarian bear tamers will show their tricks in Berlin’s Ku’damm, semi-wild Ukrainians will establish their misogynist Cossack settlements in the Po Valley at the gates of Milan, drunk and fervently praying Poles will ravage the vineyards by Rhine and Moselle, and plant shrubs that give fruits full of pure alcohol [...]. Hard to say what Romanians will do with their millions of sheep – their national feature is sheep-breeding, but above all, unpredictability. Serbs, Croats and Bosnians [...] will balkanize Great Britain [...]. Citizens of Lithuania and Latvia will craftily changing over and over identity and misleading the [Western] public opinion used to transparent criteria. Slovenians and Slovaks will pose as inhabitants of Slavonia which will make all the EU computer systems go mad. [...] And what Albanians will do is above human comprehension.”<sup>103</sup>

Here, he stresses the gap that divides Europe. The provincialism of Central Europe is treated by Stasiuk as a virtue, because the inhabitants of Central Europe know everything about the West, whereas the Westerners neglect the periphery of Europe and are driven by stereotypes.

### **László Végel – Between Central Europe and the Balkans**

László Végel, along Lajos Grendel, is yet another writer from the Hungarian minority, this time from Serbia, who willingly employs the term Central Europe. However, Végel’s experience is different, since he lives “at the border between Central Europe and the Balkans,” and he experienced the dissolution Yugoslavia, which ended the multicultural state. Similarly to Grendel, although living outside Hungary, he is a renowned writer not only among the Hungarian-speaking minority. His plays, novels and essays have been acclaimed by the Hungarian readership and critique. Végel is one of the most prominent representatives among the generation of Hungarian Vojvodina writers concentrated around the avant-garde literary magazine *Új Symposion*, established in 1965 in Novi Sad.

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<sup>103</sup> Stasiuk, Fado, 82-83.

The term Central Europe appears very often in Végel's writings. One of his texts in prose bears the term even in the title: *A nagy Közép-Kelet-Európai Lakoma bevonul a Pikareszk Regénybe* [The Great Central-Eastern-European Feast Enters a Picaresque Novel]. Nonetheless, he refers to Central or East-Central Europe mainly in his essays and commentaries. Yet, none of them is devoted entirely to Central Europe. He deals with the concept rather occasionally, in his writings about politics, literature or history. Across Végel's works one can encounter different regional labels: Central Europe, Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe or Central-Eastern Europe. The author does not define these terms and uses them quite inconsistently. However, one recurrence can be noticed. He employs the term Central Europe usually as an equivalent of the historical lands of Austro-Hungarian Empire. It also seems that among various regional terms, Central Europe is one that Végel treats in the most positive way. On the one hand, Central Europe symbolizes the lost multiculturalism of the Habsburg Empire and its much more inspiring and interesting diversity, in comparison with successive nation-states. On the other hand, in some of his essays, he applies this term in order to describe the successful path of democratization and economic reforms in the Central European countries after 1989, contrary to the negative developments in the Balkans, which fell into conflicts. In any case, Central Europe is a definitely positive term, no matter what is the point of reference.

Other regional labels do not possess such a positive meaning. Végel uses terms like East-Central Europe or Eastern Europe when he wants to refer to the region in a broader sense, assumingly to describe the entire post-communist area in Europe. Neither in this case he defines the terms, however contrary to how he perceived the notion of Central Europe, he treats these other labels neutrally, as geographical or political terms, encompassing the countries of the wide region. Yet not all of them, because a big part of the former Yugoslavia is labelled as the Balkans. He considers the lands of the old federation as belonging to two

different regions. Partly in the Balkans, partly influenced by Central Europe, or even included into it. Végel talks for instance about some of the cities of the former Yugoslavia which previously belonged to Austria-Hungary, such as Ljubljana, Zagreb and Novi Sad that he consider Central European or at the border between Central Europe and the Balkans.

Central Europe for Végel symbolizes the multicultural culture that prevailed in the region, but became endangered especially in the past years, after the demise of Yugoslavia. He observes with sorrow the disappearance of the multilingual and multicultural Novi Sad which is “a radical rupture with something that is called a Central European culture.”<sup>104</sup> He nostalgically recollects the Habsburg epoch, or the Yugoslavian period, in which he actually lived in. As he maintains, in the 1980s

“[he] still harboured certain illusions, not surprisingly, as for very many of us across Yugoslavia the conjuncture of Mediterranean, Central European and Balkan cultures with their wonderful diversity was an exciting intellectual challenge, a European venture.”<sup>105</sup>

For him Yugoslavia preserved some of the multiculturalism characteristic of Austria-Hungary, being “an exciting cultural Babylon.”<sup>106</sup>

As a member of Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, a province which in 1974 was granted a larger autonomy, he used to call himself a “stateless (homeless) Novi Sad local patriot.” Later, during the conflict, the sense of statelessness became an everyday experience for Végel and local patriotism became absurd. The “stateless local patriot” could not find the place for himself. From being part of a minority in a multinational, culturally and religiously diverse country (as Yugoslavia was), he is now again member of a minority, but this time in a relatively homogenous state. Hence, Végel writes about the tragedy of Novi Sad. The city that

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<sup>104</sup> László Végel, “Rudolf Schmitz úr Újvidéken átutazva Tišma úr tiszteletére renoválni kívánja a Dornstädter cukrászdát,” [Passing through Novi Sad, Mr Rudolf Schmitz wished to renovate the Dornstädter pastry shop in honor of Mr Tišma], in *Élet és Irodalom* 19 (2001).

<sup>105</sup> László Végel, “East European Savages,” Eurozine, 7.10.2008, <http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2008-10-07-vegel-en.pdf>, 3.

<sup>106</sup> Végel, “East European Savages,” 4.

is situated “on the edge of Central Europe and the Balkans,” combined the traits of both regions. However, in the 1990s

“the balkanization of Novi Sad was inevitable – the fact that it no longer belonged to the same state as Ljubljana and Zagreb eventually broke the Danubian balance. The disintegration of Yugoslavia called into question the special Novi Sad paradigm which was born at the meeting point of Central Europe and the Balkans in the name of difference.”<sup>107</sup>

He describes his sense of statelessness and homelessness after the demise of Yugoslavia as similar to the feeling that many former citizens of the Austria-Hungary had, after its demise.

“As a matter of fact, it is only since its disintegration that I really started to understand the writer Joseph Roth's sense of homelessness and statelessness following the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Empire.”<sup>108</sup>

In his various essays there is a recurring example of a Dornstädter pastry shop in Novi Sad, which throughout a big part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “evoked a pleasant Central European spirit.”<sup>109</sup> The premise retained its character in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but eventually lost it after 1945, and was renamed a few times, according to different ideological waves that stroke the country. The coffee shop was first called Moscow, than Zagreb, to be eventually renamed in the 1990s as “Athens”. In his short story *Rudolf Schmitz úr Újvidéken átutazva Tišma úr tiszteletére renoválni kívánja a Dornstädter cukrászdát*, Mr Schmitz presents a plan to renovate the pastry shop and restore luster of the old Dornstädter. However, the narrator – Végel himself – dissuades him from doing that, explaining that there is no way back to the old times. Although Végel is nostalgic about the past and in his dreams he visits Dornstädter, he is also aware of the current circumstances and considers the Central European world to be gone for good.

Finally, Végel reflects on the relation between the West and the Central or Eastern part of the continent. The West becomes ethnically more and more diverse, whereas in the other

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<sup>107</sup> László Végel, “Egy Hontalan lokálpatrióta,” [Homeless local patriot], in *Magyar Lettre Internationale* 40 (Spring 2001).

<sup>108</sup> Végel, “East European Savages,” 4.

<sup>109</sup> Végel, “Egy hontalan lokálpatrióta.”

parts of the continent – East-Central Europe and the Balkans – multiculturalism is in the process of disappearing. „While the western megalopolises of London, Berlin and Paris become ethnically ever more diverse, the formerly nationally motley small cities of the East are turning ethnically homogeneous.”<sup>110</sup> Before however, „when it came to implementing multiculturalism, Yugoslavia was ahead of the West: what we were born into has only been emerging in the West starting with the past two decades.”<sup>111</sup>

These various standpoints, presented in the selection of essays of eight authors, allow to reflect about the directions that the discourse developed in the 1980s took after the transition. Certainly, they do not form a coherent narrative. What is characteristic for these authors is the polyphony of uses and understanding of the concept of Central Europe. The idea of Central Europe was also by some authors in a way „privatized.” The concept is used to describe their private, particular experiences and their emotional attitude towards the region. They do not make any political claim, nor do they promote any idea of a Central European community. Further findings and comparison of the essays analyzed above are included in the last part of the thesis - that is in the conclusions.

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<sup>110</sup> Végel, “East European Savages,” 4.

<sup>111</sup> Végel, “East European Savages,” 3-4.

## Conclusions

First and foremost, the concept of Central Europe has not lost its relevance and has not disappeared after 1989. Neither did it make a great career, though. Similarly to the 1980s, it remained a domain of intellectuals, yet no longer in exile or underground. Moreover, the discourse on Central Europe had not anymore aimed at the Western public, it has rather animated the debate on identity, history and politics in the region. Contrary to most of the canonical texts of the pre-1989 discourse, the subsequent essays were written in the native languages, intended for the local readership. Answers to the main research questions – about the meaning of the term Central Europe, the features of the region and the positioning of the region against the other – revealed a significant resemblance between the Polish and Hungarian approach. They also demonstrated the similarity in the pre- and post-1989 discourse (such as the use of the term Central Europe and its main traits), yet it identified significant differences between them, especially concerning the “othering” aspect of the discourse.

As for the term itself, authors writing after 1989 have usually stuck to the notion of Central Europe. Most of them are not scholars and do not systematically reflect on the use of the term. Central Europe seems to be a notion that intuitively comes first to their mind, which proves the rootedness of the term in the Hungarian and Polish discourse. Interestingly, the distinction observed in many academic works of the two countries has not been reflected in these essays. Polish scholarship has tended to use the term Central-Eastern Europe which evokes the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whereas Hungarians (similarly to Czechs) prefer the shorter form of Central Europe, reflecting the Habsburg lands. However, in these essays if terms other than Central Europe appeared, it would rather be in the Hungarian texts: East-Central Europe (Végel) or Central-Eastern Europe (Kiss). However, the meaning of the term Central Europe was different in various texts. On the one hand, Czyżewski,

Stasiuk, Fiut, Kiss and Grendel employed a wide definition of Central Europe, including practically all the post-communist countries between Germany and Russia. On the other hand, Makłowicz and Végel used the term Central Europe in a narrower sense, basically to denote the lands of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

A separate approach is taken by Esterházy, who interchangeably uses the terms Central Europe and Eastern Europe, describing probably the whole post-communist region. Even though he claims that Central Europe is only a more fashionable notion to describe Eastern Europe, he eventually sticks rather to the former term. Esterházy tries in fact to avoid a debate over terminology which is actually what many other authors tended to do. For instance, they used alternative notions, such as Other Europe (Czyżewski, Stasiuk) or simply My Europe (Stasiuk). *Mitteleuropa*, the term that was quite unpopular in the 1980s, in the works of Makłowicz for instance occurs in a positive sense, as a synonym for the Habsburg empire, however this is a quite an isolated case. In general, the term Central Europe prevails in all the essays.

In terms of features characteristic for Central Europe, the authors analyzed in the thesis follow to a large extent their predecessors from the 1980s' Central European debate. Hence, all of them point out, for instance, the turbulent history of the region. This constitutes Central Europe: compared to other parts of the continent, the region was particularly experienced by history, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Central Europe was affected by two totalitarianisms – fascism and communism. As a matter of fact, the communist system is particularly often recalled as a common trait of the region, since it is a more recent and still fresh experience. All analyzed authors were born between 1941 and 1963, that is why each of them has personally experienced life under the system. Even in the essays of Stasiuk and Esterházy, who are either significantly detached from the previous debates (Stasiuk) or strongly critical of the 1980s' discourse (Esterházy), the view of an intense and somewhat

accelerated history of the region persists. The awareness of the difficult historical experience of these countries – a lability of borders, oppression by foreign powers and the sense of being an object of history, rather than a subject – strongly influences their feeling of regional resemblance.

Another trait that these authors “inherited” from the debate in the 1980s is the perception of multiculturalism, considered as the region’s peculiarity. The reference to the variety of cultures, religions and languages appears in the works of practically all the authors. However, their perspectives on Central European multiculturalism differ. Many of them point out with sorrow the vanishing of cultural diversity. They consider it mainly as a past feature of the region, which remains valid nowadays only to a certain extent. A particularly strong nostalgia of the past multiculturalism is displayed by Végel, who describes the peaceful coexistence of different nations and religions of Austro-Hungary and Yugoslavia, contrasted with uniformity of nation-state that followed. Nostalgia to the multinational states of the region is characteristic also to the works of Czyżewski, Fiut, Makłowicz and Kiss. For many of these authors multiculturalism is actually a value *per se*, they perceive the variety of nations, ethnic groups, languages, religions and traditions as more interesting and creative than the homogeneity and uniformity. Moreover, some of them, like Czyżewski or Kiss, refer to the bygone Central European diversity with the agenda of restoring the “forgotten” traditions and the culture of dialogue.

Most of the authors also mention the status of periphery as typical of Central Europe. On the one hand, Fiut and Esterházy stress that the complex of being a periphery causes national megalomania and leads to claiming uniqueness and superiority of a country. They identify such a response to the inferiority complex as distinctive for the region. On the other hand, some authors perceive the provincialism of Central Europe as an asset. For instance, Stasiuk finds the periphery more authentic and less flattened by the global culture. In addition,

the advantage of those leaving in periphery is that they know everything about the centre, while the centre is unaware of the periphery. Czyżewski in turn perceives the periphery as a land with a particular potential yet to be discovered.

Finally, one of the main common denominators for the post-1989 essays analyzed in the thesis is the attempt to go beyond the national narrative. For different reasons, though. Grendel, Végel and Makłowicz can hardly perceive themselves as members of one national community. The first two are Hungarians by origin, but they do not live in Hungary, whereas Makłowicz, with his mixed ancestry, feels that one national context restricts him. Therefore, they all long for the multinational entities that existed in the region, Austro-Hungary in particular. Others apply the supranational framework in order to advocate the dialogue between the nations. Although Czyżewski and Kiss assert the legitimacy of the national framework, they use regional approach to promote cooperation between the nations, as well as the peaceful coexistence of the ethnic and national minorities. Stasiuk, from his original perspective, perceives the region as composed of many territories that transgress national context. He writes for instance about the Carpathian culture which can hardly be limited to the national boundaries. Overall, the discourse on Central Europe has a significant anti-nationalist character. What is more, it does not recreate the identity politics as in the case of the 1980s' discourse, when many of the proponents of Central Europe would define the region as opposed to Russia or Soviet Union which can cause a recreation of the national chauvinism on a supranational level.

Similarly to the discourse about 1980s, contemporary authors also point out the neglect, or even disrespect of the West towards their region. The construct of the East, so aptly discussed by Wolff, is still valid, although probably diminished due to the opening of borders and the intensification of encounters between the “Westerners” and the “Easterners.” The response of the analyzed authors is however to a large degree different. They rarely prove

that they are part in the Western culture. The West becomes for them a symbol of globalization and uniformity which they oppose.

What is probably the most significant difference between the discourses from before and after 1989, is the approach to the other. The effort of emancipating from Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, so typical for the discourse of the 1980s, seems to be over. Although politicians from the post-communist states sometimes used the concept of Central Europe to differentiate their countries from the poorer or unstable regions (such as the Balkans and Soviet Union successor states), in the analyzed essays such approach can hardly be encountered. Only László Végel emphasizes the difference between Central Europe and the Balkans, attributing more positive meaning to the former.

If mentioning the other at all, the essayists examined in this thesis usually mention the West. For them, Central Europe is a region that knew multiculturalism for ages, contrary to the West which has experienced it only since a few decades. Hence, Central Europe possesses a unique knowledge that could be applied elsewhere (Czyżewski, Kiss, Végel). For other authors this region is simply more interesting and inspiring than the West, which they often portray as perfectly organized and rational, but eventually boring (Makłowicz, Stasiuk). What is striking in this perspective is a simplistic view of the West, perceived as a sort of homogenous entity, or perhaps on the basis of its richest metropolies.

In this sense, the contemporary Central European discourse is the inversion of the one from the 1980s. Analyzed authors do no longer prove that this region possesses many features of the Western culture or that in fact this is a part of the West that was “stolen.” They rather underline the particularity of the region, or sometimes precisely these traits that distinguish Central Europe from the West. Stasiuk adds that Central Europe is characterized by such multitude of little nations and ethnic groups which can hardly be even understood by a Westerner.

Certainly, the set of authors analyzed in the thesis was selected subjectively. Further research could include a variety of other essays, also from different national contexts, like the Czech and Slovak discourse which is also abundant in the literature on Central Europe, as well as from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine and other countries less often considered Central European, where the concept is employed occasionally. Moreover, the discourse on Central Europe can be observed not only in the essayism and literary works. A lot of material to analyze this discourse could be found in newspapers and blogs, as already mentioned in the first chapter.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the discourse on Central Europe is a particularly large phenomenon. As already argued, it rather remained a domain of intellectuals. However, these essays appeared usually in the major magazines or were issued by the popular publishing houses. They were often acclaimed by the readership of the particular country, some of the texts were translated into other languages of the region. This proves that they are grounded in the Hungarian and Polish discourse.

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