

(De-)constructing Central Europe: From Mitteleuropa to Visions of a Common Europe, 1918-2018

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From 18th to 20th October 2018, the conference "(De-)constructing Central Europe. From Mitteleuropa to Visions of a Common Europe, 1918-2018", hosted by European University Viadrina, Szczecin University and the Willy Brandt Center in Wrocław, took place in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, and Słubice, Poland. The conference was opened by Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Polish Studies (ZIP), Jörg Hackmann (Szczecin University) and Dariusz Wojtaszyn (Willy Brandt Center in Wrocław). The organizers presented their home institutions and academic research contributions in the field of German-Polish studies as well as Central Europe, and their scientific cooperation.

The first panel opened the debate on discourses on Central Europe. Jörg Hackmann (Szczecin) discussed the question of the end of the idea of Ostmitteleuropa and the return to the concept of Zwischeneuropa. Both ideas originated in the German geopolitical discourse during World War I, and designated the area of German political influence between Germany and Russia. Ostmitteleuropa in the narrow sense meant Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, while Zwischeneuropa being a larger space stretching from Finland to Greece. As a counterpart to both German and Russian/Soviet claims to the area, Poland developed the idea of Intermarium/Międzymorze – comprising countries between the Baltic, Black Sea and the Adriatic. Nowadays, to some Polish politicians the latter is a viable solution to current challenges in the EU.

Ljubica Ilić (Novi Sad) explored the concept of Central Europeanness in artistic discourses at the borders of Southeast Europe, namely the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian empire. She discussed the works of Danilo Kiš, a Serbian writer with Jewish and Montenegrin heritage, as well as Rudolf Brucci, a composer of Croatian and Italian origin. Both were connected to the multiethnic Vojvodina, and rejected nationalism as a means to define cultural identity. For them, the idea of Central Europe often served as a nostalgic, spiritual and intellectual refuge in a region in which people are faced with local identity conflicts, proposing ethnic diversity and Central Europeanness instead.

The third speaker Tomasz Kamusella (St Andrews) examined pluricentric and monocentric languages in Central Europe, a region that has been informed by ethnolinguistic nationalism. After World War I, nation states were created along ethnolinguistic lines, following the principle that speakers of one language constitute one nation

and therefore deserve a nation-state, i.e. countries with monocentric languages. The process in itself was artificial, given that the official language of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia became Serbo-Croatio-Slovenian. After the fall of communism, a radical process of pluricentralisation took place in former Yugoslavia, since newly independent countries wanted to legitimize their own nation-state status. Yet, after 2014, Russia has continued to use the Russian language in monocentric ethnolinguistic terms in the pluricentric post-Soviet space.

The focal point of the second panel were hegemonic visions of Central Europe. Aliaksandr Piahanau (Toulouse) illuminated Hungarian interwar attempts to create political and economic cooperation with Austria and Czechoslovakia, the so-called "Danubian Triangle." His argument challenges the view of the revanchist and revisionist policies of the Hungarian political elite, who were aware that cooperation with their two neighboring countries, preferably in a single economic unit, was necessary. Although the project ultimately failed, it was one of the main alternatives to the post-Versailles order in Central Europe, and the idea of a "Danubian Federation" gained momentum in the development of a pan-European movement.

Ádám Sashalmi (Budapest) in turn analyzed Italy's foreign policy in Central and South-Eastern Europe in the interwar period. Fascist Italy was striving to expand and strengthen her influence over the region countries of the Danube Basin, such as Austria and Hungary. The greatest danger to Italy's plans for the region was thus Yugoslavia, which Italy wanted to isolate by forging alliances with its enemies Hungary and Romania. In the 1930's, Italy's new rival over the region became Germany. Since Italy had no concrete plans how to integrate Central Europe and only ad hoc alliances to weaken its rivals, it eventually bowed to Germany's expansion in Central Europe.

Concluding the panel, Peter Polak-Springer (Doha) talked about the role of (Upper) Silesia in interwar German revisionist regional discourses. Geographically positioned between two Slavic countries, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Silesia was presented as a German peninsula and as a German bridge to East Central Europe where the Germans had political, cultural and economic claims. Catholic parties endorsed a vision of Upper Silesia as a multilingual German, Polish and Slavic region, loyal to Prussia and bound to German culture. Right-wing *völkisch* nationalists depicted the region as a fortress of Germandom, while social democrats built on a working class identity as a Central European gateway connecting Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The speakers of the third panel presented actors in the Central Europe debate. Maciej Górny (Warsaw) emphasized the contribution of geographer and geomorphologist Albrecht Penck to mapping Lebensraum in the east using the Kulturboden theory. The concept understood borders as an expansion of the center, "a momentary pit stop of the nation's strength," in contrast to the understanding of borders as encircled territory. Thus, Penck's ideas informed his students: Jovan Cvijić defended Serbian interest in the Balkans and Eugeniusz Romer claimed Poland's right to territories in Eastern Europe based on the waterway and climate division as laws of nature.

The second speaker Miłosz Cybowski (Poznań) gave an overview of "alternative histories" of Central Europe in Polish popular culture. He divided the genre into two types, the first being an alternative history of Poland with a "glorious past that never was." The second trope uses history as a background in creating a new unique world. Short stories by authors such as Jacek Dukaj were inspired by a series of paintings created by Jakub

Różalski, which the latter called "world of 1920+", where the history of Central Europe was altered by the use of massive military robots in World War I.

Keynote speaker Andrii Portnov (Frankfurt Oder) focused on the perception and development of ideas of Central Europe east of the river Oder. Starting with the idea of Mitteleuropa as a place of German hegemony with German as lingua franca. Post-World War II the narrative defined (East) Central Europe as being existentially part of the west but kidnapped by a foreign civilization, the totalitarian Soviet east. After the "return to Europe" in 2004, the idea shifted to the former territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While the Polish concept of Central Europe always included Ukraine, to the latter this concept is an obstacle to the national project because of different historical and cultural experience of Western and Eastern part of Ukraine.

The fourth panel was dedicated to the economic visions of Central and Eastern Europe in the Cold War period. Erik Radisch (Passau) reviewed the Comecon reforms from 1953 to 1971 examining the Soviet domination over East Central Europe, relation between its "imperial center" and the periphery by applying an imperial perspective. In the Stalin era, a quasi-formal empire was created where Soviet advisors in satellite states played a direct role in the creation and development of a communist state and economy. During the de-Stalinization period the reforms replaced advisors with expert commissions, introduced internationalization and institutionalization of relations, turning the Comecon into an informal empire where the Soviets achieved their goals by consensus building.

Ivan Obadić (Zagreb) spoke about the Yugoslav vision of pan-European economic cooperation in Central Europe at the time of the 1965 economic reform and liberalization. As Yugoslavia's only alternative to the major trading blocs in divided Europe, an economic cooperation with the countries of the Balkan and Danube region was proposed, by attracting neutral countries such as Austria, Sweden and Finland to create a market of 120 million people from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. A closer East-West cooperation would then lead to a relaxation of Cold War tensions. The Soviet Union would be not included in this framework, but could look at the initiative as an "Eastern OECD".

Debates on discourses on Central Europe were continued in the fifth panel. Kai Johann Willms (Munich) stressed the importance of Polish émigré historians in the USA after 1945 and their activities in shaping the idea of East (Central) Europe in the academic field. While providing expertise knowledge on Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe to American politicians, the émigré scholars also followed their own agenda. By founding Polish research institutions and connecting with Polish exiles in Western Europe, they advocated Polish historical narratives and mental maps that dated from the interwar era and presented East Central as a culturally distinct European region politically and culturally closer to Western than Eastern Europe.

Daria Voyloshnikova (Fribourg) analyzed Central Europe in the post-World War II Soviet academic discourse. Through her research of encyclopedias, academic dictionaries and fields such as geography and anthropology, she concluded that the term Central Europe was used mainly as a term in physical geography, and did not develop into a topic of cross-disciplinary discussion. Interestingly, the term "Central Europe" did not appear in works such as the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, and was used in geographic and military dictionaries as a geographical term without actually being defined.

The concluding speaker, Weronika Parfianowicz (Warsaw), examined texts from a 1999 conference in Warsaw on Central European cultural identity, where academic debates of Polish and Czech intellectuals from the 1970s and 1980s were reinterpreted according to the new circumstances after 1990. The discourses expressed fear of Western homogenous mass culture and global market, re-evaluated the "East" in search of religion and traditional values to protect national identities and local cultures. Lacking utopian imagination some authors deemed Central European projects as incompatible with the political, cultural and social reality, though at the same time many idealized past multiculturalism. Parfianowicz concluded that Central Europeans should overcome national perspectives and regard their identities as complex, multidimensional, relational and fluent.

In the final conclusion, Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast indicated that there is no single valid concept of Central or East Central Europe and noticed that there is a lack of female perspectives in the sources, since intellectuals working on this topic were mainly men. Furthermore, she stressed the economic aspect in integration and disintegration processes. Highlighting the importance of empire and post-colonial studies, she put (East) Central Europe in a global context, and underlined the contribution of migrants who circulated knowledge about the region. While the "lingua franca" of the region changed from German to Russian, and eventually to English the in the last hundred years. Jajeśniak-Quast also discussed the role of Jewish and Christian civilization, as well as the lack of a debate about the discriminated Roma population. Finally, she characterized Central Europe in a center-periphery relation, as a region returning to normality.

All in all, the conference proved to be a valuable contribution to the academic community by giving insights from interdisciplinary perspective by European authors who with their own experience with the region explored and uncovered layers of Central European ideas and identities to discover new intriguing facts that provide a cue for further research.

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