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**DOES THE CENTRAL EUROPE EXIST?
GEO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK OF CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE OUTPUT OF ANDRZEJ STASIUK
AND ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK**

Introduction

Since the beginnings of the Cold War, Europe has been usually portrayed as a continent torn between the two opposing blocks – the East and the West. It is worth focusing on issues of a broadly defined Central Europe, treated as a kind of buffer between the West and the East. The only question is whether this region really exists, and if so – what countries shall be included within this ambiguous territory. The geographical frames of Central Europe are not exactly defined, moreover, various publications describe them differently. According to Ronald Tiersky, Central European zone includes only Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary¹ – this perspective is the narrowest one, and it seems that it does not define the region as a whole. Lonnie R. Johnson and the World Bank expand this area into Slovenia², while in the European Union's program called *Central Europe*, this region is described as all the countries above with the addition of the eastern federal states of Germany, Austria, including the western part of Ukraine³.

Obviously, the cultural similarity of Central European countries is questionable. Therefore, the best criterion to distinguish the group of countries in which Stasiuk and Szczerek are particularly interested should be a wider term: *Central and Eastern Europe*. Jenő Szűcs, in his publication called *The three historical regions of Europe* draws attention to the common, both historical and cultural roots of countries included in this group⁴. On the other hand, Daniel Calin describes Central Europe as⁵:

¹ R. Tiersky, *Europe Today: A Twenty-first Century Introduction*, New York 2003. p. 472.

² L. R. Johnson, *Central Europe. Enemies, neighbors, friends*, Oxford 2010, p. 11-12.

³ European Regional Development Fund, online: <http://www.central2013.eu/home/>.

⁴ J. Szűcs, *Trzy Europy*, Lublin 1995, p. 9.

⁵ D. Calin, *Final report, NATO and the UK in the Balkans – A comparison*, Bucharest 2003. p. 12.

The Visegrad Group,
 The Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia)
 Belarus and Ukraine (with the exception of eastern Ukraine)
 the former Yugoslavia
 other Balkan countries (including Albania, Romania, Bulgaria)

The Central European area has been noticed by both scientists and writers. The most interesting landscapes of the region were plotted by two Polish writers – Andrzej Stasiuk and Ziemowit Szczerek. From the above classification Stasiuk consciously excludes Slovenia, while Ziemowit Szczerek highlights the post-German lineage of the modern statehood of both Slovenia and the Czech Republic, contrasting them with the other Slavic countries.

After all, the last of the above classification is the widest one and coincides geographically with the area of interest of both authors. According to Piotr Millati, “Stasiuk has been consistently building his own mythology of Central Europe,⁶” as the writer often detects common cultural roots or mutual factors determining the poor economic situation. On the other hand, as Millati claims, since the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, none of the states which had been previously under Austro-Hungarian command were able to cooperate and work together, which may indicate a lack of mutual trust.

Millati sees the fallen monarchy as a rim forming an “artificial unity”⁷, which is in opposition to the views of Ziemowit Szczerek, who often emphasizes the imperceptible, but still lasting legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Frankly, the European history provides no help for this geopolitical concept named Central and Eastern Europe. In the general and colloquial awareness, Europe is divided dichotomously into the East and the West, with no room left for the Central zone. This division brings with it certain values and traditions. The new order established in Yalta after World War II led to the emergence of two separate blocks, that reflected the regional existence of two radically different civilizations. The Central Europe was unable to produce its own centre of culture, being only the clashing periphery of one or another civilization.

Obviously, the existence of the two opposite blocks is strictly associated with the course of history. The first division prefiguring the dichotomy was the emergence of the Eastern and Western Roman Empire – over the next hundreds of years, the subsequent geopolitical alliances were often built on the basis of this event.

Central Europe was excluded from this division, and started to be considered in overall as peripherals, which were usually recognized as part of the Eastern Europe. Therefore, this region had to constantly provide evidences of its distinctiveness. This has resulted in an extreme affirmation of Western Europe, which, according to Millati

⁶ P. Millati, *Inna Europa. Nowa mitologia Europy Środkowej w prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka*, [in:] *Nieobecność: pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, eds. H. Gosk, B. Karwowska, Warsaw 2008, p. 174.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

quoting Milan Kundera, led to a paradoxical situation, as Central Europe is today “more European than Europe itself⁸.” He also called this region “a beautiful daughter of Europe⁹.”

In today's Central Europe portrayed by Szczerek and Stasiuk, there are two opposing traditions that affect even the present time of these countries. The first tradition is closely connected with the Polish sentiments. In Poland, the tradition of the Republic from sea to sea is still preserved – it was used as a political concept in the times of the Second Republic, and the most ardent advocate of this solution was Polish marshall Józef Piłsudski¹⁰. The new political entity, called The Intermarium, existed as a legacy of the Jagiellonian dynasty, and was seen as a confederation of states. Obviously, Poland had to be the head of the confederation. The Intermarium largely coincides geographically with today's Central Europe.

Mitteleuropa as an Austro-German legacy

The second tradition is the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the concept called Mitteleuropa, which was established there in the nineteenth century. It was associated with the attempts of federalization of the monarchy, which were perceived as the last chance for continuity. This concept aimed to give the countries included in the Austro-Hungarian part self-reliance, but it irrevocably collapsed with the end of the World War I, although between the years 1933 and 1945¹¹ it was adapted to the needs of the Third Reich, in connection with its expansionary policy¹². In addition to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the term Mitteleuropa was also used in Germany.

However, it should be noted that at first Mitteleuropa was a strictly geographical category, only the Polish side started to pay attention to the historical and political context of this term¹³. Joseph Partsch, apart from Feliks zu Schwarzenberg, was one of the creators of this concept¹⁴. According to him, the Central European zone includes also the German Reich, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania and Bulgaria, and even Belgium and the Netherlands¹⁵. This view, seen from today's perspective seems to be a bit anachronistic, especially that the lion's share of today's Poland (not to mention Ukraine) was located, according to Partsch, outside of the Central European spectrum.

Obviously, such a definition is associated with the partition of Poland between the contemporaneous partitioners. The exclusion of the eastern Polish territories occurred

⁸ Ibidem, p. 175.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ L. Sykulski, *Geopolityka. Słownik terminologiczny*, Warsaw 2009, p. 59.

¹¹ D. Calin, *Final report, NATO and the UK in the Balkans – A comparison*, Bucharest 2003, p. 12.

¹² L. Sykulski, *Geopolityka. Słownik terminologiczny*, Warsaw 2009, p. 59.

¹³ P. Eberhardt, *Geneza niemieckiej koncepcji Mitteleuropy*, [in:] „Przegląd Geograficzny” 2005, 77, 4, p. 464.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

due to their shift towards the Russian sphere of influence. The concept of Partsch was founded in 1904, and its impact in later years turned out to be an ominous thread. It seems that the analogies between this division and the subsequent Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact are more than obvious. It can be argued whether or not the existence of Mitteleuropa constituted the aggressive Nazi-German geopolitics, which proved to be disastrous for many nations.

Central and Eastern Europe and post-Soviet mediocrity

Perhaps not only precisely tailored geographical framework will be used to define Central Europe, but rather a specific *zeitgeist* associated with a difficult history, abounding in periods of bloody uprisings, the lack of independence, or simply poverty. According to Aleksander Fiut, the demarcation line, which uniquely identifies the analyzed area is “the extent of space marked by chaos, disintegration, mediocrity, and degradation of civilization¹⁶.” For this reason, a slightly extended term: East-Central Europe, can be used as a synonym.

Despite the indication of cultural and geopolitical autonomy of the East-Central Europe, sometimes the region is still commonly perceived as a part of the Eastern Europe, and thus- regardless of the inadequacy – a part of the post-Soviet space.

It is sometimes considered that the cultural frame of Eastern Europe begins where after World War II the Soviet zone of influence was established, and ends somewhere around the eastern frontiers of the former Soviet republics. The geographical affiliation of Mongolia or Kazakhstan to Asia does not change the fact that all the time, there is a well-established cultural circle on the remains of the Soviet Union, which drew Stasiuk's attention in his collection of essays called *There are no expresses on yellow roads*¹⁷. There were numerous processes in the USSR, which included social engineering, leading to the creation of the so-called identity of homo sovieticus (dog Latin for Soviet Man)¹⁸. According to Alexander Zinoviev, the key features of the Soviet society included: indefiniteness, liquidity, volatility, ambiguity¹⁹. Moreover, even today there are people in Russia or Kazakhstan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, who answer the question of their national identity by simple words: “я советский человек.” For such people the term is not associated with slavery, lack of initiative or critical thinking, rather, it will be linked to a nostalgic trip to the times of their childhood. It is true that in the Central Europe this kind of nostalgia for the Soviet Union is absent, but the process itself works exactly the same as the one observed in the former Yugoslavia, called yugonos-

¹⁶ A. Fiut, *Powrót do Europy Środkowej? Wariacje na temat pisarstwa Andrzeja Stasiuka i Jurija Andruchowycza*, [in:] *Nieobecność: pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, eds. H. Gosk, B. Karwowska, Warsaw 2008, p.157.

¹⁷ A. Stasiuk, *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach*, Wołowiec 2013, p. 5-10.

¹⁸ A. Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus*, Warsaw 1987, p. 168-169.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

talgia or ostalγια, the longing for the GDR, which is sometimes noticed in the eastern lands of today's Germany.

Between the past and the present

Remembering the past, there is a need to focus on current events. Another factor situating individual Central European countries within one of the two great blocks, may be the present membership in international organizations such as NATO or the European Union on the side of the West, or the Eurasian Union in the East. A strict border is very unclear, and the area of the East-Central Europe is a place of intersection of different patterns, which may take over, depending on the currently prevailing spirit of the times – either the western or eastern patterns. Until recently, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were generally considered as a part of the former Soviet (Communist) block²⁰. In 1989, due to political transformations, Europe changed its face again²¹. According to Maria Todorova, these changes were associated with the death of Central Europe²². On the other hand, the famous poet Czesław Miłosz associates the term Central Europe with the fight against the Soviet domination²³. Present Central European international organizations emphasize the desire to move away from the post-Soviet legacy. Thanks to the Visegrad Group and the Central European Initiative, various European countries recognize their mutual influence and common needs. Despite this, some of the minor organizations clearly became less important because of the European Union. The best example of that might be the fate of the Central European Free Trade Agreement.

Although among the signatories of this agreement were Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, today it functions rather as an initiative agglomerating the Balkan states, and with the expansion of the European Union, the whole organization gradually started to become useless.

Central Europe. Stereotypes

The image of the Central and Eastern Europe is also affected by stereotypes. However, it should be noted that the process of forming each of them is movable, extended in time, and if it is subjected to a diachronic analysis, different conclusions may be reached than after a synchronous analysis. Historian Hans Henning Hahn, the author of the book called *Stereotype, Identität und Geschichte. Die Funktion von Stereotypen in*

²⁰ W. Tomasik, *Pociąg do nowoczesności. Szkice kolejowe*, p. 63.

²¹ S. Škrabec, *Wschód albo Zachód*, [in:] idem, *Geografia wyobrażona. Koncepcja Europy Środkowej w XX wieku*, Cracow 2013, p. 47.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 48.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

*gesellschaftlichen Diskursen*²⁴, who studies stereotypes, especially those related to the Eastern Europe, highlights the key factor shaping the negative stereotypes – they were mainly formed at the interface between urban and rural areas²⁵. Therefore, the reason for the existence of the stereotype of the wild, uncivilized East was not the geographical, occidentality-oriental, dichotomous location, but it has rather become a consequence of the lack of urbanization, industrialization, etc. Hahn notes that Western stereotypes about the east side of the continent were formed by the end of the eighteenth century and were related to the inability of a successful implementation of upgrading processes, both in the economy and society. Those processes were present in the western part of Europe, as well as nascent capitalism and growing third class, burghers, who were constantly becoming richer. Inevitably the East was poorer, and the class of burgesses was almost non-existent in that part of Europe. This has by far created and strengthened those negative stereotypes.

Interestingly, until the nineteenth century Germany had been described in Western Europe as a backward, wild country, struggling with the plague of drunkenness²⁶. Only after the Spring of Nations, Germany began to be identified with the existing stereotypes, both in the Eastern and Western Europe. The reasons for this volte-face are related to another stereotype present in the West at that time, which was, however, positive and even ennobling. There was the belief that every respectable nation should have its own colony. Therefore, the space for colonization started to be identified by Germans not with distant countries on the other side of the ocean, but Eastern European areas located close to the German borders. This is the exact reason for the existence of significant differences in the development between Germany and areas colonized by them. The Eastern European areas, unlike Bismarck's state, remained in the eyes of Western nations a typical eastern area – wild, uncivilized and poor. Significantly, the land of today's Poland could not be defined as explicitly eastern. Approximately 50% of the stretches of the areas of the Kingdom of Prussia were ethnically Polish at that time, while Lubusz Land, Lower Silesia and Western Pomerania were mostly inhabited by Germans.

On the other hand, a large part of the Polish territory inhabited by the Polish minority came under the Russian rule. The vast majority of the population of this annexation were Ukrainians and Belarusians. Religious and linguistic kinship (in the case of the eastern Slavs in present-day Ukraine and Belarus) allowed for a quick acquisition of Russian (Eastern) patterns of civilization, which almost led to mass Russification in Belarus and in the east of Ukraine. The ambiguity of national identity in Ukraine

²⁴ H. H. Hahn, E. Hahn, *Nationale Stereotypen. Plädoyer für eine historische Stereotypenforschung*, [in:] H. H. Hahn, *Stereotyp, Identität und Geschichte: die Funktion von Stereotypen in gesellschaftlichen Diskursen*, Berlin 2002, p. 20-21.

²⁵ H. H. Hahn, *Czy Wschód Europy mógł rozwinąć się szybciej niż Zachód?*, int. Z. Szczerrek, 2012, interia.pl, online: <http://fakty.interia.pl/raporty/raport-srodek-wschod/opinie-ar-tykuly-wywiady/news-czy-wschod-europy-mogl-rozwinac-sie-szybciej-niz-zachod,nId,926824> [20.05.16].

²⁶ Ibidem.

caused several problems lasting to this day, with the peak – a civil war, which began in 2013, making clear that the deep division of the country still exists.

Russian-speaking east favourably supports the Russian worldview, while in the west the people emphasized pro-European sympathies. For these reasons, Ukraine should be regarded as a hybrid space, post-Soviet, but aspiring to the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Echoes of this heritage can also be found in Andrzej Stasiuk's works, who notes the cosmopolitan dimension of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, seeing in this country “a failed prototype, but still a prototype of the united Europe²⁷.” Moreover, the author of *Fado* notes the reason for the still-existing nostalgia for the Austro-Hungary in the aesthetisation of the First World War²⁸. The writer describes the war as “the last war of the old type”, where the troops did not use tanks, and the war itself had - although it does sound quite ominous – an elegant course²⁹.

Ending

The societies of the East-Central Europe are suspended in a state of waiting, as wrote Stasiuk, “they are stuck between the communism that has gone, and capitalism, which has not come yet³⁰.” The geopolitical dichotomy between the East and the West is clear and reinforces elementary differences both on the achievements of civilization and the state of the people's self-consciousness. The commentator of the output of philosopher Emil Cioran, Tomislav Sunic, drew attention to this factor, writing³¹: “It's time for affluent Europe to pack and leave, passing on the historical scene to more virile peoples. Civilization becomes decadent when it takes freedom for granted; the disaster is imminent when it becomes too tolerant of every uncouth outsider.”

Sunić directs the above remarks towards the western part of the continent. This appeal is also an affirmation of previously unseen peoples of the East-Central Europe. After many years of ignoring the “unrefined” people from the centre of Europe, they are demanding the due respect.

Still, uncertainty is always inscribed in the fate of Central Europe, through which the future history of this area can never appear as a guarantee of infrangible borders and eternal order. A similar view was presented by Zygmunt Bauman, who wrote about the new postmodern uncertainty, which is to apply to “the future shape of the world, tomorrow's ideas about the reasonable life and after tomorrow's measures of the validity of life decisions³².”

²⁷ A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, Wołowiec 2006, p. 120.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 121.

³⁰ A. Stasiuk, *Wschód*, Wołowiec 2014, p. 23-24.

³¹ T. Sunić, *Emil Cioran i kultura śmierci*, 2009, online: http://planetcioran.blogspot.com/2009_09_20_archive.html [11.07.16]

³² Z. Bauman, *Jak stać się obcym i przestać nim być* [in:] idem, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Warsaw 2000, p. 43.

It seems that such concerns are particularly pronounced in Central Europe, which only recently ceased to be considered as the so called second world. Bauman sees it distinctly, saying: “The second world does no longer exist; residents of the barracks, elevated to the rank of sovereign states woke up – to use Claus Offe’s witty statement – in the tunnel at the end of the light³³.”

Summary

DOES THE CENTRAL EUROPE EXIST? GEO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE OUTPUT OF ANDRZEJ STASIUK AND ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK

This paper summarizes in a brief way the cultural affinity of individual states in the Central European region. It takes into account the geographical context, while taking under consideration the work of the two authors whose output is strictly connected with the Central European context - Andrzej Stasiuk and Ziemowit Szczerek. The analysed aspects are: historical and geopolitical aspects as well as stereotypes.

Keywords: Europe, Central Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, geography, region, culture, history

Streszczenie

CZY ISTNIEJE EUROPA ŚRODKOWA? RAMY GEOGRAFICZNO-KULTUROWE EUROPY ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ A TWÓRCZOŚĆ ANDRZEJA STASIUKA I ZIEMOWITA SZCZERKA

Niniejszy artykuł podsumowuje w krótki i zwięzły sposób powinowactwo kulturowe poszczególnych państw w regionie środkowoeuropejskim. Przede wszystkim brany jest pod uwagę kontekst geograficzny, przy jednoczesnym zwróceniu uwagi na twórczość dwóch autorów literatury, zajmujących się problematyką środkowoeuropejską – Andrzeja Stasiuka i Ziemowita Szczerka. Pod uwagę brane są czynniki historyczne i geopolityczne oraz wpływ stereotypów na postrzeganie Europy.

Słowa kluczowe: Europa, Europa Środkowa, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, geografia, region, kultura, historia

³³ Ibidem, p. 46.

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