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Central Europe: Dream or Nightmare ?

Werner Weidenfeld

Boom time in Central Europe, and the intellectual pulse rate implies just one thing: change. The crises, failures and stagnation of all the major postwar plans for Europe might now simply be a background to new prospects, and it is now clearly the time for a rethinking of the European middle. From this middle, in fact, Europe appears ready to be reconstructed—from Berlin to Vienna, Prague, Warsaw and Budapest.

This latter area contains contradictions just as much as it is also a cultural whole, and there are as many dividing factors as there are unifying ones: in Central Europe there are many different names for the same place. Whereas other everyday European factors often threaten to sink in the midst of cultural indifference, torn as they are between market, bureaucracy and business, reflections over the Central European question offer no chances of intellectual boredom. There are many examples of these sensitive reflections.

Nowhere and somewhere

Milan Kundera, to give a first example, has taken Central Europe as one of the key concepts in his vocabulary:

“Central Europe in the seventeenth century. The strength of Baroque culture forced a certain cultural unity throughout this multinational, and thus polycentric area, with its changing and undefinable borders. The late shadows of Baroque Catholicism reached over into the eighteenth century: no Voltaire

and no Fielding. In the hierarchy of art, music took over the leading position. From Haydn on, as far as Schönberg and Bartok, this was the focal point for European music. The nineteenth century. A couple of great poets, yet no Flaubert, the essence of Biedermeier: just an extended veil of idyll over reality.

In the twentieth century, revolt. The greatest minds (Freud, and the novelists) revalued all that had been misunderstood or unknown over the centuries: rational, demystifying lucidity, a sense of reality, the novel. And their revolt was just the opposite of French Modernism, which was anti-rational, anti-realistic and lyrical (a factor which was to cause much misunderstanding). What was behind the Pleiad of the great Central European novelists—Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch and Gombrowicz? Their reaction against Romanticism; their preference for the novel before Balzac, and for libertinism (Broch saw *Kitsch* as the conspiracy of monogamous Puritanism against the Enlightenment); their mistrust of history or of any illumination of the future; in short, a Modernism going beyond the illusions of the Avantgarde. The fall of the Habsburg monarchy and, after 1945, the marginal cultural position of Austria, as well as the political insignificance of the other countries concerned, all make Central Europe a vivid warning signal of the possible destiny of the whole of Europe—a laboratory of decadence and fall.”

A second example of thinking in the area is given by Adam Zagayevsky, born in Lemberg, who has created his own, wholly personal image of Central Europe:

“A common denominator does exist, I believe, but it is a complicated arabesque formula. To come back to the great intellectual authorities again—what kind of common denominator can be found for figures such as Ionesco, Cioran, Eliade, Holan, Kundera, Pilinszky, Patocka, Havel, Herbert, Milosz and Gombrowicz? Perhaps an acute sensibility, a clear sense of threat, an awareness of catastrophe (as though they were all volcano researchers). Yet they offer such a diversity of reactions, of proposals, of intellectual music! Eliade wanted to be a new Buddha. Cioran is an ancient Stoic, without any hope. Herbert is like an ancient Stoic who has not lost all hope. Milosz reads Swedenborg. Gombrowicz has preferred to read Heidegger. Havel wants to act, to operate, to do. Cioran must have shuddered at all these ideas. Pilinszky was a Catholic, Eliade more or less a heathen. Should the reader of Holan’s beautiful poetry know that the poet lived for a long time under a kind of house arrest?

Every literature simultaneously has a role both *nowhere* and *somewhere*—on the one hand in no localised place, yet on the other, in a particular setting; in a purely spiritual realm, yet also in a homeland of its own. Shakespeare gave the Czechs the sea, and thus Vladimir Holan can even give an English reader the ocean, for all great poetry borders on the infinite. Any viewpoint associating a literary or artistic work too closely with geography is doomed to failure. Only a doctrinary could assert that it is Central Europe which sets the pens of these so-called masters into motion. If we lose sight of art's splendid *nowhere*, then we are becoming dogmatic ourselves."

Finally, to take a third example, Leszek Kolakowski despite all scepticism clearly sees Central Europe as more than a simple myth:

"It may naturally be argued that the concept of Central Europe is just a legend, a myth. It expresses a nostalgic longing for that European world which vanished forever at the end of World War I. For reasons which are evident, Central Europe no longer exists in the political sense. On the other hand, the certain common cultural feeling uniting the whole area does not seem to me to have been lost.

Today the political significance of the concept of Central Europe probably lies in the fact that in the eyes of Western Europe and America, Central Europe has become an appendix of the Soviet Union, as though the people in the countries concerned had resigned themselves to living with this unnatural situation for ever. To this extent, then, the concept of Central Europe is politically important. Whether or not it will be culturally influential cannot be predicted with any certainty. I believe, however, that particularly in the three countries which were so violently robbed of their sovereignty and annexed to the Soviet Empire—Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary—the awareness of being united by a common destiny is growing, and the various conflicts and enmities of the past have lost their significance."

Elegant confrontation

What sense can be made of this multi-faceted discussion? Where exactly is its purpose? What are the intentions of those involved in the debate. And thus the questions pile up, making some kind of systematic organisation of the subject necessary.

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Treatment of the subject "Central Europe" offers a series of intellectual backdoors which allow elegant confrontation of the real key problem, and some of these lines of thought may now be stated.

Firstly it might be maintained that Central Europe is only a general and diffuse image, impossible to define clearly and thus not to be politicised in any concrete way. Even simple attempts to define the expression itself are already so varied that hardly any political concept may be established.

Secondly, reference might be made to the fact that the literature on Central Europe often expressly denies that there is any political programme to be pursued. It is more a question of simply bringing some form of common awareness to expression.

Further reference might be made to the real fact that the most recent revival of the Central European issue began in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, was taken up in Austria, and only subsequently reached the Federal Republic of Germany: the Central European issue seen first and foremost as a vehicle for the detachment of the Eastern Europeans from their superior ally partner, the Soviet Union.

Finally, it might be emphasised how the Europeans, and particularly the Germans, actually retrieve a part of their historical identity when they focus their attention on the East. Since the end of World War II, Eastern Europe has been largely cramped out of, and unnaturally eliminated from Western European perspectives, overshadowed as it is by the all-influential East-West conflict.

During the Cold War, Eastern Europe was stuntedly reduced to a purely negative background factor. The current discussion thus helps lead to a desirable normalisation.

For in all epochs, Eastern Europe has been involved in the history of Germany. Germany has received cultural impulses from both East and West, and relations with the political forces in East and West have been a dramatic theme of German policy over the centuries. The major cultural-political questions in Germany have always been territorial issues at the same time. In Germany, the question "Who are we?" has always implicitly asked "Who are our partners?", "Where do we belong?" and "Where do we want to fit in?"

Here it is necessary to consider the great, decisive conflicts and basic configurations of Germany, such as the dualism between Prussia and Austria, for example. This dualism did not always lead to contradiction between the two powers. There was common defence against the French Revolution, against Napoleon, or against the liberal movements. Nevertheless the conclusion drawn by Prussia at the end of the Seven Years' War was decisive: Prussia could not build its hopes on Austria, on France or on England. It was saved by Russia's about-turn to neutrality—the root of the long, close relationship of Prussia, and later of the Bismarck empire, to Russia.

This Prussian-Austrian dualism led to quarrelling over the concepts of *Großdeutschland* or *Kleindeutschland*. Thus the nineteenth century struggles for democratic freedom and national unity were also loaded with territorial questions. The *Paulskirche* episode failed, and with it the attempt to create a German nation-state by using the power of middle-class, liberal ideals, and to put behind such a state the whole propelling force of the freedom movement of that time.

Bismarck's nightmare of coalitions must also be considered in this connection: his fear of being outflanked by alliances with superior forces, and his efforts to keep the strings in his own hands, in order to be able to cope with all the strategies developed by the international power configurations. Thus, just as it was Bismarck's maxim always to be on the side of the majority in the system of the five great powers, Weimar policy was also based on keeping all its options open (both eastwards or westwards), on exploiting every crack in the international framework, and on getting involved in relationships only to a limited extent, both with the East and with the West.

Here, the ghost of Rapallo must be taken into account: the neighbours' worry that the Germans might try to cast off their relations, to revoke their bonds of solidarity, or to play their own game without any consideration for their previous partners, simply in order to develop new options through closer contact with the Soviet Union and thus revolutionise the European security asset.

Outdated perceptions

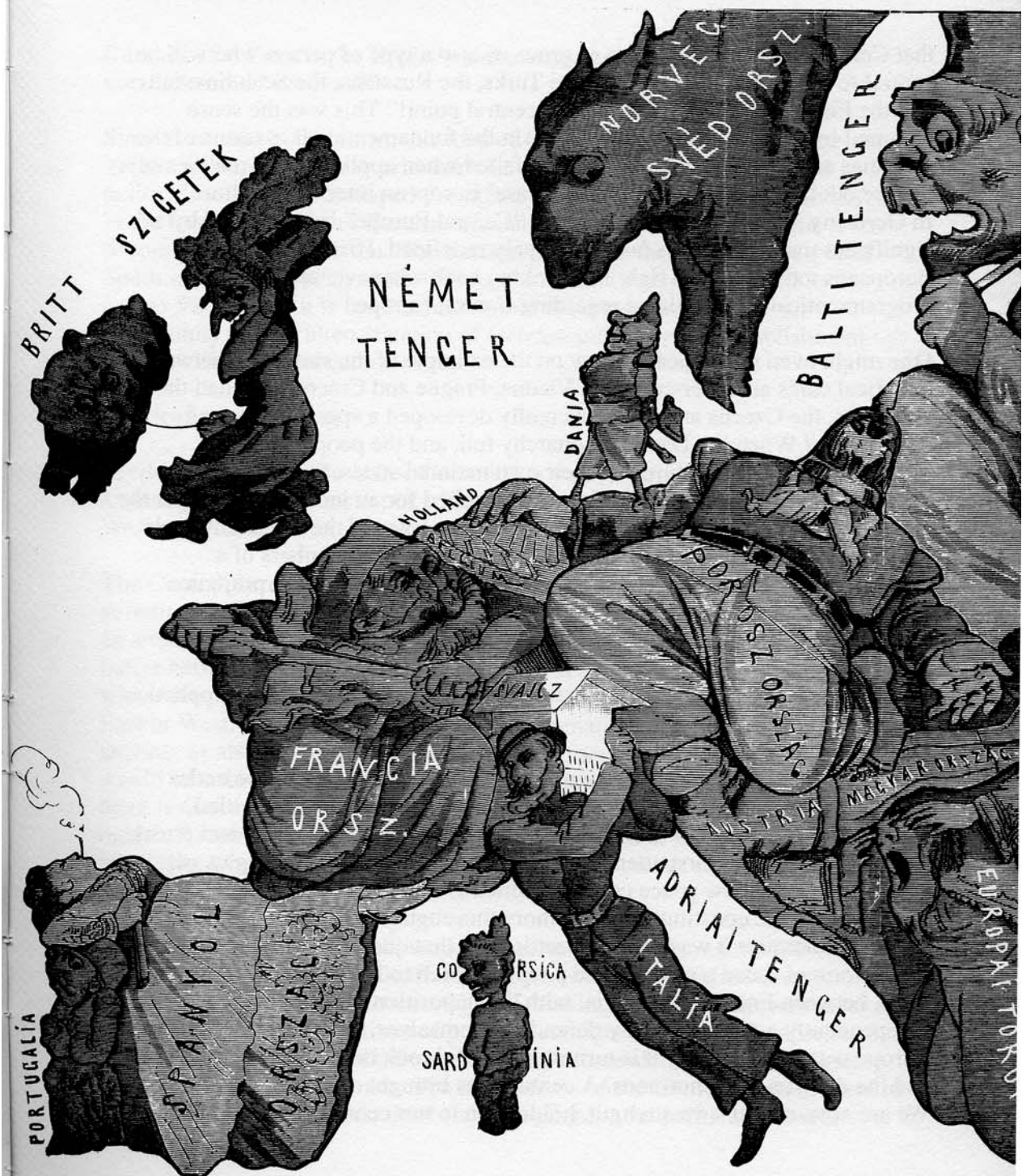
These historical references show, then, why such sensitivity has to be used in dealing with political issues, involving as they always have, the territorial questions of the Germans. The references also show that even though all possible intellectual solutions can supply correct indications, they still shed too little light on the key issue of German territorial definition.

To tackle the subject thoroughly once and for all: Central Europe is—socio-psychologically speaking—a cultural-political construct. We need this kind of generalised orientation framework in order to filter and classify the information we receive. Now such cultural-political constructs are introduced and acted upon by intellectual elites, so the decisive question is: who is currently responsible for introducing the concept “Central Europe” into the German Federal Republic, and for what reasons?

The question must be expressed in this critical, polemical form precisely because it makes all the difference whether it is in Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Vienna, or Bonn, that the theme is introduced and acted upon. The central issue—who is currently responsible for introducing the concept “Central Europe” into the German Federal Republic, and for what reasons?—I should like to answer in four points:

First of all, it is essential to decide exactly which image of Central Europe is to be acted upon as an intellectual construct. As formulated in 1915 by Friedrich Naumann in a contribution to the debate over the aims of the War, the political concept of Central Europe meant a German sphere of influence in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe.

The Central Powers—understood to be a unit consisting of Germany and Austria-Hungary—were to take over the leadership in Central Europe, which implied involvement of both East and West: “It is around a Germanic kernel



that Central European culture is to grow, as also a type of person who will be central to the French, the Italians, the Turks, the Russians, the Scandinavians and the English. Let us search for this central point!" This was the sense assumed by the Central European issue in the fundamental discussions of the Twenties and Thirties. Naumann's idea failed when applied to the realities of the period: there was no place for a Central European interfacial culture. In Germany, then, the political concept "Central Europe" is influenced by a significant tradition, and is not to be freely redefined. Historically aware Europeans today are thus right in shrinking back whenever anything programmatical is formulated regarding Central Europe.

One might even nostalgically draw on the example of the similarity between historical cafés and beer-cellars in Vienna, Prague and Cracow. Yet had the Austrians, the Czechs and the Poles really developed a specific sense of community? When the Danube monarchy fell, and the peoples of the monarchy turned to establishing their own national states, they all had highly different perspectives in mind. Hungary searched for an individual place in the Danube area. The Western and Southern Slav peoples of the monarchy took their prospects from the West and attempted to become members of a Western community on an equal basis. Conflict and resentment, prejudice and discrimination between the nations in this area are thus difficult to reduce to some measure of structured community.

Friedrich Naumann's proclamation turns out to have been only too prophetic before this backdrop of facts:

"The Congress of Vienna was the reorganisation of Central Europe under Russian protection. We do not consider the German constitution settled on that occasion to be all that bad. Despite its tangible weaknesses and errors, it was nevertheless a first attempt at a task which is now occupying us yet again. Before the new peace congress which is in front of us today, we will have to study the constitution much more thoroughly than was done fifty years ago, because it was with that settlement that quarrelling began over the future form of those territories and peoples which today, between East and West, between France and Russia, with the opposition of England, are independently and successfully defending themselves. In that period, Central Europe was rubble; today it is turning into solid rock before our very eyes, and the difference is enormous. A century has brought about a miracle. We are now, on our own strength, holding on to our centrality against the

Russians, the French, the English, and many others. If only the Freiherr von Stein could see it all!"

Since then, and in this form, this idea of Central Europe has been discredited. Yet the fact must not be overlooked that the concept of Central Europe as a political factor first developed during the course of the nineteenth century. And in the form of a factor of Eastern orientation in Germany and Austria, it has become politically relevant. The basis of this is the fact that in widespread South-eastern European areas, German has been largely considered as the *lingua franca*, and it is for this reason that the region was seen as an opportunity for the intensification of German influence and establishment of a specifically German mission.

Political romanticism

My second observation is that Central Europe as a political programme lacks an indispensable dimension of realistic workability, as neither the East nor the West supplies the actors up to the task of realising the task at hand.

The Central European issue comes to the foreground in the form of diverse variations: as neutrality for Central Europe, as Central European culture, or as an alternative system of security in Central Europe which would also act as a buffer between the world powers. Now this is a question of plans and ideas which the political actors involved have not been able to realise in either East or West. The right conditions in the international framework are lacking, as also are the much needed selfless ascetics of world politics who would take the burden of a power-political vacuum on themselves, and as there is also a lack of effective political nuclei able to guarantee such a model. To bring it all down to a common denominator: it is political incapacity which is unable to transform this vision out of the world of dreams and into reality.

This lack of realistic political workability, however, does not diminish the explosive topicality of the Central European issue, for there has always been an old tradition in German political thinking which has allowed ideas to escape from the complications of political configurations into Romanticism, into the auspicious land of pure reason. And this tendency is good at finding surreptitious paths into chaos. The temptations of the Germans would seem to be endless: special courses, dead ends, longing for the politically absolute, or



the cultivation of amnesia. Under the hard surface of political reality there often smoulder cultural yearnings for those radiant ideas able to eclipse all political burdens and frictions. As though the search for ways of escape into irrationality might lead to finding the key to political fortune.

Yet it is not only a penchant for political Romanticism which today lends the concept of Central Europe its attractiveness and magnetism. The concept combines a series of further cultural and socio-critical undercurrents: in view of the apocalyptical defence-political visions rife, more and more credit is being given to the view that it might be possible to elude the spiral of threat between East and West and take care of regional peace alone—independently of the power-political matrices of East-West conflict. The re-establishment of German unity would be an additional and obvious consequence in the case of a settlement of Central Europe, and the latter would thus finally head for a glorious future, neither ridden by fear of the Bolsheviks nor lamed as a docile vassal of the USA.

A new nationalism is again styling the nation as the embodiment of a successful existence in which the individual and the collective find themselves in complete agreement. It is thus clearly not disturbing if this view has nothing to do with the real situation of the nation between Dresden and Munich, or Leipzig and Aachen. And this view is created by a widespread tendency to overestimate the force of willpower: the Germans really only need to express their will, as Central Europeans and along with Central Europeans, in order for them to lead European relations towards their longed-for nation and their longed-for peace.

The dream of Central Europe—this could become a reservoir for the confluence of old and new nationalists, pacifists and neutralists, just as it could become a nodal point of anti-Western thinking, political detachment and critical rejection of industrial society. And the socio-psychological undercurrent behind all this leads on ultimate analysis to uneasy scepticism towards anything modern at all. Romantic hopes become the answer to uncalculable complications, and compensation for the experience of political disillusionment.

Salvation in unity

My third point is—which interests are behind the attempt to create and act upon the old idea of Central Europe? The idea has the function of detachment from the *status quo* in Eastern Europe, in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere, above all as detachment from the Soviet Union; in the Federal Republic of Germany it allows detachment from the USA and from France. The interests behind the creation of the Central European idea thus imply escape from political bonds. In short: today, the concept 'Central Europe' is a creation of political romanticism.

Fourthly, the success of the Central European issue is closely connected to the success or failure of European integration.

The socio-psychological undercurrent of the European idea has unpredictably changed. The emotional driving power behind the founding generation has worn out, and sceptical questioning has been taking over the foreground. Socio-psychological ambiguity over European unification may be traced back to the fact that its functioning, influenced by both its successes and failures, is no longer a basis for growing enthusiasm amongst its citizens: the very process

of European unification has become an experience of everyday political functioning which is taken for granted.

Anyone amidst the ruins of World War II who had anticipated today's degree of integration would have then thought to be a political dreamer, and dismissed as being hostile to reality. In the meantime, however, this dream of the war generation has become our accepted reality, taken for granted to such an extent that we are no longer fully aware of the passionate struggle down the long road. To us, the successes of European unification have become part of the political culture we live in, without our being aware of their singularity, and without our realising just how much significance they have for humane community life.

Foregone conclusions in politics offer no catalysts for political enthusiasm, no aims for human hopes. The citizens have not been made aware of the change from pure ideas to political reality, and frustration and melancholy are the inevitable consequences.

The dream of a Central Europe insinuates itself within the dispositions and through the cracks of the house which the Europeans had wanted to build after World War II for the democratic constitutional state. A remarkable mixture of overtaxing the idea of Europe, of frustration over the difficulties and crises of integration, and of conceptual uncertainty, have made the erosion of the idea of integration possible. And here, neither pathos nor cloudy rhetoric is of any help: the foundations of the unification of Europe are again being put to the test on the basis of their encumbrance—as also by the alternative dream of Central Europe. The success deficit in the West is consequently the best ally of the Central European concept. The refuge of the Germans into a dreamworld of a new order could thus also be easily prevented: by successful experiences in the integration of Europe.