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Central Europe, 1989-2004: Cultural and Geopolitical Perspectives

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Summary

We have chosen this subject as a continuation of the research I have undertaken for my Bachelor and Master Theses, where we have studied the different definitions and geopolitical representations of the Central European region during the interwar years and the last two decades of the Central-Eastern European Communist regimes, respectively. During these chronological periods, Central Europe was defined in a double sense, geographically and as an imaginary construct, I have considered necessary a reflection on how its mental and geopolitical perception shifted at the end of the Communist era and in the years following the collapse of the Communist East-Central European regimes. The manner in which the Post-Communist intellectual and political elites have shaped and perceived the Central European region during this time has relevance not only for the problem of exiting Communism and overcoming the transitional years, but also for the theme of “returning to Europe” and finding a geopolitical location near, and then within, Europe (understood as the European Union) and NATO, by underlining the European affiliation of these states. Therefore, analysing how the Central European space has defined itself in reference to the European Union before the accession offers an analytic framework for its subsequent evolution as a member state within the Communitarian structures: that is, the importance on building a regional security and cooperation community.

We shall approach the representation of Central Europe in its narrow meaning, referring only to the territory of Czechoslovakia (from 1993 the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland. We shall base our study on two research hypotheses. First, we shall question how the representation of Central Europe, as a geopolitical space and a cultural idea, was created during certain temporal intervals by means of an elite reacting to a certain external context. Second, we shall try to see how this representation of Central Europe has evolved from a time period to another, by adapting itself to the changes in variables associated to external geopolitical circumstances.

We have structured this scientific research in six chapters. First, we will briefly discuss the relation between culture and geopolitics in the Central European space, as well as the manner in

which their interdependence determined the creation of certain representations of the region. Also, we will succinctly define the methodological approaches that we will use in our subsequent research. In what the cultural perspective on Central Europe is concerned, the literary texts published along the time were generally taken as elements of analysis. As for the manner of geopolitically interpreting Central Europe, the most adequate approach is that of Constructivism and Critical Geopolitics.

In the second chapter, we will succinctly discuss the premises of creating a representation on Central Europe during the interwar years. The two dominant geopolitical visions that were shaped during this period over the Central European region came from the German space, respectively from the part of the Allied Powers (especially France). The essence of these two perspectives projected from the outside on Central Europe was a geopolitical one, seeking to achieve certain objectives of limiting the influence of a power over this space. Starting from the manner in which these two representations were formed, we will then study how the Central European states reacted by formulating specific orientations in their foreign policies or a certain cultural unity based on common elements. In this sense, we will discuss the political aspirations and projects that appeared concerning a possible organisation of the region. On the other hand, we will analyse the emergence of a specific Central European literature by appealing to shared images and archetypes from the final decades of the Habsburg Monarchy. Also, we will describe how a geopolitical representation of Central Europe inspired by France was projected by means of the written press in the Central European states by making a short analysis on a review published in French language in Prague during the interwar years.

In the third chapter, we will approach the resurgence of the idea of Central Europe during the 1970s and 1980s following a rise in the dissident intellectual discourse in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The reconceptualisation of Central Europe during this time stemmed from the domestic political context in these three countries, and especially the nature of the Communist regimes installed after the Second World War that provoked a certain reaction from some local intellectual elites. The new representation of Central Europe developed, therefore, exclusively at a cultural level and comprised elements inspired by the interwar debates on the region, as well as aspects resulting from the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War. An important aspect of this representation of Central Europe was, thus, its reconceptualisation from within, as a project of the Central European intellectual elite that addressed a specific geopolitical context, and was directed to the political and intellectual circles from abroad. Unlike the interwar period, this perspective on Central Europe was not imposed from outside, but on the contrary, was projected towards the outside, entering the debate of the Western European researchers. The cultural representation

shaped during this time and its characteristic elements will greatly influence the perception of the Central European intellectual elites, and after 1989 it will represent a point of reference in formulating the directions of domestic and foreign policy in their own countries and in the whole region.

In the next three chapters, we will address the manner in which the cultural and geopolitical representations of Central Europe defined and reconfigured themselves in the years following 1989. In the fourth chapter, we will deal with how Central Europe was defined and constructed as a distinct historical region of the European continent, starting from the way in which the dissident intellectuals brought into debate this aspect during the 1980s and then continued this tendency in the research undertaken during the 1990s. Since Central Europe started from a discursive representation of its cultural identity, its structuring as a distinct identity can be best discussed from the perspective of an “imagined community” or a “region-building process”. Central Europe can therefore define itself as an idea that naturally travels from a mental image of a space to a regional cultural identity that is overlapped on several nations, developing itself then as a historical region with a specific evolution so that in the end it becomes a political community.

In the fifth chapter, we will analyse how the cultural representation of Central Europe, created by the dissident intellectual elite from the Communist countries during the 1980s, was continued and modified in the following decade. Since most of the texts published now belonged to authors that were active within the dissident circles and therefore were involved in formulating this representation, the changes that appeared were referring mostly to the relation with Europe and the European civilisation, and the shared experience of the Communist regimes. The manner in which the author perceives himself and how its heroes act remains, thus, influenced by the system of thought and moral values in which he was formed, even if everything is now reported to the new circumstances of Post-Communism and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, a differentiation occurs between literature and essay writing, as the former dissident intellectuals become now political decision-makers and opinion shapers in their own countries, and so profoundly political ideas gradually exit the cultural realm. The essays, on the other hand, generally discuss Central Europe’s report to Europe, but the Europe they refer to is not that of a similar West in cultural and moral values, but also the political and economic community of the European Union.

In the last chapter we will discuss the manner in which the Central European region repositioned itself from a geopolitical point of view during the 1990s, by redefining itself in relation to the political interests and aspirations of the Euro-Atlantic integration. Since the reference point taken into account in building the cultural and geopolitical representation of

Central Europe changed after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the political implosion of the Soviet Union, the region's main relationship was with Europe, understood less as the sphere of Western civilisation and more as the European and Transatlantic political and economic structures. This rapport towards the politically and economically institutionalised Western Europe remained a constant of the period following 1989 and it concluded with the successful accession of the Central European states to NATO and the European Union. In what the reconceptualisation of Central Europe is concerned, the first half of the 1990s meant its transformation into the Visegrád Group, strengthening cooperation in different areas in order to efficiently implement the transitional reforms to democracy and market economy. In the second half of the 1990s, as the Central European states were awarded the status of candidates for the accession to NATO and the European Union, the Visegrád representation was toned down because it was not convenient for it to be perceived as a possible regional alternative to the eastern enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. This is the moment when the representation of regional economic cooperation within CEFTA is highlighted, as it brought advantages in the relation with the European Union, i.e. it proved the success of the Post-Communist economic transformations in the Central European states and their adjustment to the challenges of the European common market. At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the political discourse of the Central European states will make more and more use of the examples of successful regional cooperation, in the form of Visegrád and CEFTA, in order to support their readiness for acceding to the European Union. This is obvious not only in the official discourse of the political leaders from these states, but also in the written and electronic press from this period, through the themes preferred and the frequency with or context in which a certain representation is used. Therefore, we will analyse the official political discourse from the Post-Communist Central European states in order to point out how the representation of Central Europe was instrumentalised in the strategies of getting closer to the European and Atlantic institutions. At the same time, we will make an analysis on the contents of an important newspaper from the Post-Communist period, the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* published in Warsaw since May 1989, in order to follow the evolution of the representation given to Central Europe by the political elites and its frequency in the public opinion discourse.