

Central Europe: Political Idea and Historical Reality

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The Slovene poet and writer Edvard Kocbek wrote in 1940, shortly before the German-led invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia at the outset of World War II, that the main characteristic and defining aspect of the one million square kilometers that lay between the European East and West was this region's ethnic and cultural diversity. Kocbek, however, regretted that the region never recognized its diversity as an advantage, nor did it succeed in promoting it vis-a-vis Western Europe as a positive quality. On the contrary, Central Europe, because of its fragmented nature, fell victim to the imperialist ambitions of larger neighbors. The area's diversity became a constant source of international tension and conflict.¹

According to Kocbek Central Europe had come under the strong influence of its German neighborhood during the so-called "modern era," initially by romanticism through Herder's ideas, which became the "guiding lines" and the bases of "national identities and feelings of all Central European nations," and later by Hegel and the idea of the strong ethnic state. The German abandonment of Herder in favor of Hegel would have at least two negative consequences for Central Europe: the first was the expansionism of the German Empire, and the second came in the form of attempts on the part of the nations of the region to establish their own nation states, a process that would lead to overemphasizing of ethnic differences between themselves and their neighbors. The only way out of this trap, which caught Central Europe between Herder's understanding of national ethnic allegiance and Hegel's understanding of a national ethnic state was, in Kocbek's view, a reorganization of the Central European state system. Kocbek was of the opinion that Central European nations and states should, on the one hand strengthen their cooperation, going so far as to form an "economic federation," and on the other, recognize their ethnic and cultural diversity as "an undeniable

¹ Edvard Kocbek, *Srednja Evropa (Central Europe)*, Dejanje, III, Ljubljana 1940, 89-92.

advantage and positive quality,” assuring all of them – large and small – mutual respect and “national and cultural autonomy.”

István Bibó, a Hungarian lawyer, essayist and democrat presented six years later – in 1946 – in his essay “The Misery of the Eastern European Small States,” a completely different view of Central and Eastern Europe. Developments in Eastern and Central Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries were, in his opinion, mainly characterized by conservative, ethnocentric and nationalistic tendencies, by “nationalistic narrowness,” lack of “democratic spirit,” and “lack of realism.” Bibó maintained that these negative characteristics were unique to Eastern and Central Europe and were hardly known in the modern history of the European West. There were in Western Europe, as he wrote, old and strong nation states, which had succeeded over time to do away with minority linguistic groups and regional peculiarities, assuring them continuity and stability. By way of contrast, no such long-lasting and strong nation states emerged either in Central or Eastern Europe. As a result, national borders were in a constant state of flux. This became a huge, if not an insurmountable problem in the 19th and 20th centuries and one of the main causes of national antagonisms and conflicts. Bibó thus regretted that the Habsburgs, as he put it, had been too preoccupied with Germany and the German Empire and thus failed to develop their monarchy into a strong and centralized empire following the example of Western European kingdoms and states.²

The “diversity,” which was for Kocbek an advantage and an “extraordinary quality” was for Bibó a tragedy. Kocbek was persuaded that “ethnic and cultural diversity” could become a basis of modern Central European democracy; Bibó believed that the absence of traditional strong states was the main reason for the “lack of democracy” in Central and Eastern Europe. Kocbek was a poet; Bibó was an essayist and moralist. Their essays on Central Europe not only reflected two very different views of the region, but also two very diverse ethnic and historical experiences: the Slovene versus the Hungarian.

Discussions about the boundaries of Europe began of course long before Kocbek and Bibó wrote their essays. The western boundary of Europe has never been particularly problematic: it has been clear that in the west, Europe ends with

² István Bibó, *Die Misere der osteuropäischen Kleinstaaterie*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik 1992.

the Atlantic and Great Britain. However, Europe's eastern borders were far less clearly defined. Until the end of the 17th century the northwestern boundaries of the Ottoman Empire reached into what later became the European "centre." Classical 15th and 16th century Europe was thus much smaller than the Europe of today. It "spread" to the east only after the Austrian victories over the Ottoman Empire in the late 17th and 18th centuries. The reforms introduced by Peter the Great and Catherine II brought Russia closer to Europe. Although certain individuals continued to doubt whether Russia east of St. Petersburg could be considered part of European civilization, as a result of Russian reforms, by the 18th century Europe finally acquired eastern borders. And once it had its east and its west, it started discovering its "centre."

Until the beginning of the 19th century there was no doubt about what that "centre" was. Until 1806, when abolished by Napoleon, Europe's centre consisted of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. It is true that it was just a formal entity without actual political or military power, but its existence ensured an important balance, no matter how uncertain. This became clear in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna when the victors over Napoleon were redrawing Europe's political boundaries; they found themselves having to figure out how to deal with the many German states and create a new order in the European "centre."³ One of the big questions, discussed in Vienna a little more than 200 years ago, was how to assure the stability of the large area between the autocratic Russian Empire and still potentially revolutionary France. The Austrian chancellor Clemens Metternich thus brought to the discussion the idea of a Central European alliance with the Habsburgs at its head, which would include the Habsburg Monarchy, the newly created German Confederation, several Italian states and a number of Swiss cantons. However Metternich failed to obtain support for his proposal.

The idea of Central Europe as a particular region of Europe was embraced later in the 19th century by liberally minded German intellectuals and politicians, as part of discussions regarding the possibility of economic and political union between the Habsburg Monarchy and Germany, as well as a possible unification of

³ Arnold Suppan, *Der Begriff »Mitteleuropa« im Kontext der geopolitischen Veränderungen seit Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Geographischen Gesellschaft, 132 Jg., Wien 1990, 196. Jacques Droz, *L'Europe Centrale: Évolution historique de l'idée de Mittelueropa*, Paris: Payot 1960, 31-51.

all territories populated by German speakers. Non-German, particularly Slav, Czech and Slovene middle class politicians, who since the revolutions of 1848 had advocated the reorganisation of the Habsburg Monarchy into a federation of autonomous nations with equal political rights possessed a different understanding of Central Europe. Historians therefore look for the predecessors of the Central European idea in the works of German economic and political thinkers of the 19th century such as Friedrich List, Karl Ludwig von Bruck,⁴ and Constantin Frantz. At the same time they discover elements of later Central European political ideas in the Austro-Slavic and federalist plans of the Czech historian František Palacky, Czech poet Karl Havlíček, and Slovene lawyer Matija Kavčič. According to Palacky the only chance to achieve a modicum of independence for the smaller nations squeezed between more powerful German and Russian neighbours was to become part of a multiethnic federal state in the European centre, achievable, as he believed only by the reorganization of the Habsburg Monarchy into a federation of autonomous and equal nations.

The discussion initiated by the question of relations between the Habsburg Monarchy and Germany continued after the formation of the Second German Reich in 1871 under the influence of Germany's growing ambitions. At the beginning of the 20th century German geographers attempted to give the idea of Central Europe (in German: Mittel- or Zwischeneuropa) a clearer definition. In 1904 we see the establishment in Berlin of an association under the name of Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftsverein, set up with the purpose of backing joint Austrian and German investments and economic interests in Southeastern Europe and further east in the Ottoman Empire.⁵ All these attempts in fact openly supported the German idea that the areas between Germany and Russia,

⁴ Ludwig von Bruck (1798-1860) was in the 1830s one of the founders of the Austrian sea transport insurance and shipping company in Trieste Austrian Lloyd, from 1849 to 1851 Austrian minister of commerce and from 1855-1859 Austrian minister of finance. He was in the 1850s the primary architect of Austrian chancellor Schwarzenberg's Mitteleuropa plans advocating the union of Austria (together with Hungary), the Zollverein and the North German states into a Central-European customs union, in which Austria and the Habsburgs would reassert their leading position. Bruck was according to the Italian historian Arduino Agnelli the first to use the term Mitteleuropa already in the 1840s. Arduino Agnelli, *La genesi dell'idea di Mitteleuropa*, Giuffrè Editore, Milano 1973.

⁵ R.J.W. Evans, *Austria, Hungary, and the Habsburgs, Essays on Central Europe c. 1683-1867*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 299. Carl Freytag, *Deutschlands »Drang nach Süden«, Der Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftstag und der »Ergänzungsraum Südosteuropa« 1931-1945*, Göttingen: V&R Uni Press and Wien: Vienna University Press 2012, 30.

particularly those settled by Slavs, were integral parts of a German economic and cultural sphere.

The concept of Central Europe did however, as is well known, gain worldwide attention thanks to the book *Mitteleuropa*, by the German liberal politician and Lutheran pastor, Friedrich Naumann. Published in Berlin in 1915, when World War I was in full swing, *Mitteleuropa* became a best-seller in Germany and Austria-Hungary. Naumann supported the idea of forming a large Central European confederation, which would be the result of the union between the German Reich and the Habsburg Empire and would – in the area between Great Britain and Russia – create a strong economic and military community independent of either the Anglo-French West or the Russian East. Naumann also concluded that this confederation should not have an exclusively German, but a supra-national character, and therefore should not gravitate towards enforced political, linguistic and national uniformity. According to Naumann, the establishment of a Central European community was simply a necessity, as he believed that small and medium-sized countries had no political future. The task of the German nation, wrote Naumann, was thus to “defend” its own “nationality” as well as the “nationality” of its non-German allies. However, as the British historian Robin Okey points out, Naumann compared the “role of smaller nations as planets to the German sun.” Naumann’s concrete political idea was German domination of the European centre; his *Mitteleuropa* was to become the region of German expansion and its “main goal was to make Central Europe the German base for the world power status Naumann assumed the British, Americans and Russians already had.”⁶

Naumann’s book strongly divided German and Austro-Hungarian public opinion. For militant Great-German nationalists it was -- with its tendency to an agreement with non-German, particularly Slav nations -- the expression of national defeatism, and therefore contrary to German national interests. In the Habsburg Monarchy it was well received by Austro-German nationalists, but not by the “industrialists fearful of competition” and “the official class with its Habsburg

⁶ Robin Okey, *The Habsburg Monarchy c. 1765-1918, From Enlightenment to Eclipse*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 2001, 382.

loyalties.”⁷ Hungarians and Czechs expressed opposition to Naumann's ideas although there were Austrian-German intellectuals, who while agreeing in general, pointed to the differences between Austria and Germany. The Austrians saw a special role for Austria and Austrian culture between Germany and the Slavic world. For example, the renowned poet Hugo von Hofmannstahl, discussing the problem of the relationship between the German Empire and Austria, turned Mitteleuropa into an essentially Austrian concept. In Hofmanstahl's view Mitteleuropa was a special region in Europe, where German speakers and culture had traditionally played a dominant role. In contrast to Naumann, he located Mitteleuropa's centre in Austria, which had in his opinion an important role to perform as mediator between the Germans and Western Slavs, and between the European West and East.⁸

The debates regarding Naumann's Mitteleuropa, however, had no influence on the political decisions of governments in either Vienna or Berlin. A Slav response came in the form of Czech political leader Thomas Massaryk's idea of a federation of small nation states between the Baltic and the Aegean Sea, which would separate Russia from Germany, but this too quickly sank into oblivion. National states, which after World War I emerged on the territory of the dismembered Habsburg Monarchy, were in the 1920s and 1930s entering into mutual alliances, but these were mostly pragmatic and far removed from the plans that continued to be put forward by various adherents of Central European co-operation. “Newly established states (in Central Europe) demonstrated much greater skills in discovering means for isolating one from the other than in establishing friendly relations,” wrote Professor Elemer Hantos in Budapest in 1932. Hantos offered his own proposal for a Danubian economic confederation. His proposals, however, fared no better than other ideas put forward in the years before World War II calling for unions of “small nations” from Scandinavia to Greece.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea: Selected Essays and Addresses 1906-1927*, translated and edited by David S. Luft. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press 2011, Introduction p. 2. Friderik Lindström, *Empire and Identity, Biographies of the Austrian State Problem in the Late Habsburg Empire*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press 2008, 149-151.

⁹ Jacques Droz, *L'Europe Centrale...*, 244, 247-249.

In the early 1930s the concept of Central Europe came to be actively discussed once more in Germany. In the new National-Socialist political vocabulary the term *Mitteleuropa* clearly designated the territory which was presumed to be not only a vital part of German living space, but also the natural German economic hinterland. In line with such views Nazi adherents of *Mitteleuropa* emphasised a special mission of Germans in the European centre, and appealed for closer economic and political links between Central European states and Germany. The idea of *Mitteleuropa* became thus in the 1930s an argument and a justification of German economic and political expansion into Central Europe and into the Balkans, and an important instrument of German diplomacy which, from 1934 onward tried to establish in the territory between Germany and the Soviet Union a new system of relations with the German Reich at the top. By the time of the outbreak of World War II *Mitteleuropa* had become merely a concept by which to explain and justify Nazi military expansion. The Central European states, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, were Hitler's first victims, and Hungary became a loyal German satellite. The idea of Central Europe was thus ultimately compromised – especially in the German formulation of *Mitteleuropa*. Compromised also was the idea which, from the originally German concept of a special organisation of the European centre, turned into a one-sided weapon of German domination.

In 1945 it seemed therefore that the fall of the German Reich would put an end to discussions about Central Europe. The notion was remembered as an integral part of the Nazi vocabulary and thus had a pronounced negative connotation. At this time, there was no reason to discuss Central Europe at all. After the end of World War II, the area in the European centre, between the East and the West, no longer existed.¹⁰ Europe had only the East and the West, divided by a thin line – the Iron Curtain. After the Yugoslav break with Moscow in 1948, one could even say that Communist Yugoslavia was the only space left between the Soviet European East and the European West. However, even in Communist Yugoslavia one could perceive a split between the political orientation of leaders, whose hearts continued to beat towards the East **while** their economic interests lay increasingly to the West. In the early 1960s, French historian, Jacques Droz,

¹⁰ Timothy Garton Ash, »*Mitteleuropa*«, *Daedalus*, Volume 119, No.1 (Winter 1990), 1-21.

concluded that the designation Central Europe could no longer have any modern meaning and could only be the subject of recollection, research and history.

But a decade later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Central Europe was rediscovered – first in northern Italy. The idea that, even after more than a century of existing within the Italian state, regions formerly part of the Habsburg Monarchy were in economic and cultural sense in many ways closer to the Central European countries than to central and southern Italy became discussed particularly in the north-eastern part of Italy, along the Italian border with Yugoslavia and Austria, in Gorizia and Trieste. This discussion on the one hand led to demands for more intense inter-regional economic co-operation across the existing state boundaries, and on the other to discovering a “common” Central European history, which sank into oblivion after the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy.¹¹ From the very start these endeavours to define the supposed cultural unity of Central Europe were filled with exaggeration, unconcealed nostalgia and emotional flirting with the “Habsburg myth,” which already in 1963 was criticised by the renowned Trieste-based writer Claudio Magris.¹² The northern Italian initiative for discovering the “common Central European tradition” was thus received with considerable scepticism. The very term ‘Mitteleuropa,’ which the Italian authors used in its German form, was controversial. In the early 1970s, when the Central European debate was reopened, many experts and politicians therefore believed that it would not last very long.

Again they were wrong. In the 1970s Central Europe was no longer discussed and written about only in northern Italy, but also in Austria and in the countries of the Eastern European communist bloc. By the 1980s, it became one of the popular topics among the Eastern European – Czech, Polish and Hungarian – dissident intellectuals -- opposed to their countries’ communist regimes. With the writings of Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, Milan Kundera, György Konrad, Czeslaw Milosz, Jenő Szücs and many others, Central European discussion was given new life. The main ideas of these writers and intellectuals can be summarised briefly in the following manner: Central Europe indeed had its own

¹¹ Catherine Horel, »The Rediscovery of Central Europe« in the 1980s, in: *The Fall of the Iron Curtain and the Culture of Europe*, Edited by Peter I. Barta, New York: Routledge 2013, 24-30.

¹² Claudio Magris, *Der habsburgische Mythos in der modernen österreichischen Literatur*, Wien: Zsolnay Verlag 2000.

historic destiny indelibly marked by the smallness of its nations and by constant threats from powerful empires, in particular the Russian Empire and the German Reich. This destiny is supposedly characterised by the fact that Central European nations, trapped between the European East and West, and subjected to the pressures of their bigger neighbours, did not manage to establish their own, long-lasting states that would have enabled them to develop in an independent way. Due to a lack of more resolute independent economic and political elites, certain political tasks and those concerning effective formation of a “civil society” had to be undertaken by intellectuals. Thus the sphere of culture in Central Europe became the most important means of national self-realisation. In this sense, Central Europe has been a distinctly transitional area, which was and is hard to define clearly and territorially.¹³

These and similar views, although they had to do with history, were – of course – more oriented to the present and the future than to the past. For Central European intellectuals, opponents of the region’s communist regimes, the question of Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s was above all the question of the future of that part of Europe which had been erased from the European map by Bolshevism and the division of Europe into blocs in 1945.¹⁴ This is why the question had a strong political charge until the great changes which at the end of the 1980s abolished communist regimes and bloc borders. The search for the “lost Central European identity” was – if viewed from Budapest, Prague, Krakow or Ljubljana – an integral part of the resistance to the bipolar order of the European continent created during and after World War II. The Soviet Union, by spreading its influence and authority towards the West after 1945, thus became in the eyes of the Central European intellectuals one of the main causes of Central Europe’s misery. Czech, Polish and Hungarian advocates of the Central European idea resolutely rejected Bolshevik political and ideological concepts and strove for the restoration of a “neutral” and “democratic” European centre which, by a return to parliamentary democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of opinion and ideological diversity, would develop into a community of “free and independent peoples,” as the Czech writer and later the president Vaclav Havel put it.

¹³ Milan Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, The New York Review of Books, April 26 1984.

¹⁴ Jacques Rupnik, *L'autre Europe, Crise et fin du communisme*, Paris: Odile Jacob 1990, 19-42.

In the years since the above-mentioned ideas were formulated the situation in Central Europe has thoroughly changed. The Iron Curtain fell, Bolshevism was historically defeated, firmly sealed state borders became porous, and communication channels, which had for decades been cut off, were revitalised. All the same, the discussion about Central Europe at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s did not end; it only entered a new phase. Naturally, the starting points and expectations varied considerably, depending on the situation in particular states. While on the one hand, the idea of Central Europe as a democratic community of “free and independent” nations did encourage closer links between those who since 1945 were prevented from maintaining meaningful ties – for example Czechs and Austrians – on the other hand – could not prevent misunderstandings and conflicts arising among those, who for decades had lived together in peace – for example Czechs and Slovaks or Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

An important result of the new co-operation in the European Centre after the collapse of communist regimes was in 1991 the creation of the Visegrad group (named after the Hungarian town where it was founded). Conceived originally as an alliance of first three and -- after the break up of Czechoslovakia in 1993 -- four Central European states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) the Visegrad Group reflected the efforts of leaders to work together in areas of common interest. One of its most important achievements was the creation of an International Fund for Cooperation among Visegrad countries and the establishment of a framework for consultation regarding European Union issues. After 2004 by which time all four states had become members of the European Union, the alliance lost some of its original importance and became less active, but in recent years – confronted with huge economic and social problems in the member countries the group revived its activities, expanding participation on occasion to such non-member states as Slovenia and Croatia.

Subsequent to the collapse of Communism and the accession to EU membership of former Communist states, discussion about Central Europe as a distinct historical and cultural region of Europe lost much of its actual political meaning. The renowned British historian Eric Hobsbawm even saw in the re-emergence of the Central Europe debate in the 1970s and the 1980s a dangerous

“return to the idea of Mitteleuropa,” which in his opinion belonged more to politics than to geography and more to pragmatism than to reality.¹⁵ However, one cannot dismiss the question of historical roots of Central European concepts as merely a pipedream of overzealous Central European apologists and admirers of the Habsburg monarchy. From a historical viewpoint it is clear, as pointed out by none other than Hobsbawm himself, that there was never only one, single Europe and that there were in Europe through its whole history areas or whole regions with diverse dynamics of political, economic, social and cultural change.¹⁶ One of these areas has been also the so called European centre, either geographically limited to the Habsburg territories (this means contemporary Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, northern Italy, the Romanian parts of Transylvania, south-eastern Poland and western Ukraine) or in a broader sense, including also the rest of Poland, Prussia, Lithuania and Germany’s southern states. From a historical viewpoint as well it is clear that Central Europe was never a supranational cultural entity. We have in this sense to agree with the Serbian writer Danilo Kiš, who maintained that “the differences between different national cultures in Central Europe are more important than their similarities.”¹⁷ Nevertheless there are at least four characteristics that combine to provide a persuasive definition of Central Europe as a distinct region. All four have had a long-term impact on the development of Central European societies.

1) As has been pointed out by historians, Central European countries lagged behind those of Western Europe not only in their economic, social and demographic development, but also in the slow emergence of towns and middle classes, which resulted in long-lasting political and legal domination by the nobility, and -- until as late as the 19th century -- the subordination of the peasantry. Faster social and economic modernisation was at the same time hindered by -- in comparison with Western and Eastern Europe -- first weak and later in the 19th century rigid and deformed state institutions, which were unable to enforce

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Return of Mitteleuropa*, Guardian (London) 11, October 12 1991. Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other, the East in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1999, 147-148.

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, “The Curious History of Europe”, in: E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, London: Abacus, 1999, 293.

¹⁷ In English: Danilo Kiš. »Variations on the Theme of Central Europe«, in: *Cross Currents, A Yearbook of Central European Culture* 6, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 1987, 1-14.

efficient state integration.¹⁸ Thus Poland – as is well known – disappeared from the European political map for 130 years because, in contrast to the Russia of Peter the Great and Catherine II, it was unable to form an effective, centralized government. Prussia needed more than one hundred years of reforms to become the nucleus of German unification, and the Habsburgs, who under Joseph II already failed to unify the Monarchy either linguistically or administratively, had to face a new setback in their centralizing ambitions in the second half of the 19th century. To the two Habsburg failures to strengthen the central state power must be added the opposition of the “old” non-German nations, the Hungarians, Czechs and Poles, whose resistance would have an important influence also on smaller “non-historic” ethnic groups (such as the Slovaks, Croats, Slovenes and Ukrainians), encouraging them in the 19th century to develop into politically vigorous nations desiring to keep and to assert their distinct identities.

2) The national and cultural diversity of Central Europe, particularly of its central part, which belonged to the Habsburg Monarchy, was thus the consequence of the above-described developments. These developments, however, did not prevent the emergence of similar or comparable political, cultural and educational institutions. Whole generations of people of various Central European nations were educated in similar or comparable schools and universities. Thus they formed similar or at least comparable norms of social life and behaviour as well as similar sets of national values and views, in which language and culture had the central position as vital constituent factors of national self-affirmation and awareness. This resulted in a widespread transnational net of mutual influences and contacts throughout various historical periods: from the birth of humanism through the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Enlightenment, 19th century Romanticism all the way to the “fin de siècle.”

3) The third important characteristic of Central European development is the structure of the middle classes, predominantly composed of people who attained their social status through education (in German, *Bildungsbürgerthum*). The liberally minded middle classes involved in business and economic activities

¹⁸ Philip Longworth, »Central Europe: Selective Affinities«, *Times Literary Supplement* No. 4, September 1989.

were in most of the Central European countries, as in the German Empire¹⁹ and the Habsburg Monarchy, comparatively weak. Educated to become employed in the state or provincial administration, members of Central Europe's middle classes were therefore much more inclined to look for political balance and compromise, a characteristic that had a decisive influence on the political orientation of the region's governing elites. This inevitably affected their political affiliations, activities and values, which were mainly marked by their ideological views and much less by their social and economic interests. Social and political middle class elites in most Central European countries were thus too conservative and too weak to create a firm democratic tradition and to pave an efficient path to modernity, a fact that became all too apparent in the 20th century, when they first failed to stand up more vigorously against Nazism and German expansion, and later, after 1945, when they did little to resist the communist seizure of power.

4) And last but not least, the fourth characteristic, which American historian Lonnie Johnson went so far as to put at the top of the list: Ever since converting to Christianity, the great majority of Central Europeans have been Catholics and as such both religiously and culturally closely connected to the European West. Their links to Roman Catholicism has had an enormous influence on their social and cultural development as well as the development of their institutions. Thus, Central Europe, according to Lonnie Johnson, never really abandoned the European West as a primary point of cultural orientation, although the formative impulses from Western Europe have been changing through the centuries.²⁰

Let me conclude here with the following: Central Europe was and is in this sense not only an idea or simply an ideological invention, but was at least for the past two hundred years also a historical reality with its own dynamics of change and its own path to modernity, both of which have been shared by most Central European nations and countries. Cultural and national diversity was only one of the characteristics of the Central European past, the other, much more negative and fateful was aggressive nationalism, which had tragic consequences for the Jews of

¹⁹ Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Wie »bürgerlich war das deutsche Kaiserreich?, Aus der Geschichte lernen?*, München: Beck 1988, p. 194.

²⁰ Lonnie R. Johnson, *Central Europe, Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 4, 3-12.

Central Europe, particularly in the second half of the 19th and 20th centuries for it was the Jews who became the main victims of national extremism and the widespread anti-Semitism that came to be a common feature of all Central European countries. But in spite of the extremely negative historical experiences of nationalist intolerance, anti-Semitism and political authoritarianism, there is in the Central European past also a positive heritage of federalism, mutual transnational influences as well as a sustained tendency toward multiculturalism and multinational cooperation and coexistence. At a time when we are engaged in the process of European integration, we should not ignore these positive aspects of the Central European experience. On the contrary, we need to take them ever more seriously.