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Eastern Europe: how the term changed the map

Abstract

The article discusses the conception of Eastern Europe as a historical and cultural region. The different meanings associated with terms for parts of Europe (Eastern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Europe) are analyzed, with their various positive connotations (common destiny, solidarity of small nations, particular cultural paradigm, etc.) and negative implication (lack of full recognition, departures form European, underdevelopment, etc.). Changes in the denotations of various terms, in particular Eastern Europe, are shown (e.g. the idea of Central Europe separated from Eastern Europe). It is argued that the choice of terms with particular meanings and connotations determines the attitude toward the region and the challenges it faces (the Russian invasion and its ongoing threat), ranging from solidarity to double standards (the idea that European norms do not apply equally to everyone). It is emphasized that the notion of Central and Eastern Europe can best promote solidarity between the countries in the region and the recognition of their shared destiny, which should reinforce mutual cooperation and support in the face of common threats coming from the East (Russia).

Keywords

Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, identity, historic and cultural region

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia koncepcję Europy Wschodniej jako regionu historycznego i kulturowego. Analizie poddane zostają różne znaczenia związane z terminami określającymi części Europy (Europa Wschodnia, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia oraz Europa Środkowa), wraz z ich pozytywnymi konotacjami (wspólny los, solidarność małych narodów, specyficzny paradygmat kulturowy itd.) oraz negatywnymi implikacjami (brak pełnego uznania europejskości, odchylenie od europejskości, niedostateczny rozwój polityczny i gospodarczy itd.). Ukazane zostają zmiany w zakresach znaczeniowych poszczególnych pojęć, zwłaszcza Europy Wschodniej (np. wyodrębnienie koncepcji Europy Środkowej jako oddzielnej od Europy Wschodniej). Argumentuje się, że wybór terminów o określonych znaczeniach i konotacjach determinuje sposób postrzegania regionu oraz wyzwań, przed którymi stoi (rosyjska inwazja i związane z nią trwałe zagrożenie), prowadząc do postaw od solidarności po stosowanie podwójnych standardów (przekonania, że normy europejskie nie obowiązują wszystkich w równym stopniu). Podkreśla się, że pojęcie Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej najlepiej sprzyja budowaniu solidarności między państwami regionu oraz uznaniu ich wspólnego losu, co powinno wzmacniać współpracę i wzajemne wsparcie w obliczu wspólnych zagrożeń ze Wschodu (Rosji).

Słowa kluczowe

Europa Wschodnia, Europa Środkowa, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, tożsamość, region historyczno-kulturowy

Introduction

It has been more than thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, but the region still cannot decide what to do with its new identity and what to call itself now. Back in the day, there was a lot of talk about "returning to Europe," the emergence of a "new Europe" and thus the birth of a "new Eastern Europe." But where is Eastern Europe now? And if it is not where it used to be, where has it gone? In fact, no simple answer as to where it is actually located can be given.

In the literature, understanding the term "Eastern Europe" in its geographical sense depends on the author and their place of residence. The authors of the EU Eastern Partnership memorandum (which was drawn up in Stockholm) counted Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and three Transcaucasian countries: Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia as part of the "New Eastern Europe." (Plokhy 2013). Serhii Plokhy, likewise, believes that Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are the core of the "New Eastern Europe." These countries have recently found themselves in a unique geopolitical position, pushed to the west by the enlarged European Union and to the east by Russia. As they never thought of forming a separate region before, they did not develop their own group definition in the world of international politics. The concept of Central and Eastern Europe, which has been popular in Poland since the 1950s, has never excited the imagination of the elites in the "New Eastern Europe" (Plokhy 2013). In fact, there is also no consensus outside the region on whether the NEE countries are part of Central and Eastern Europe. Jerzy Kłoczowski, the most active proponent of the idea of Central and Eastern Europe, insists that it includes Ukraine, while Robert Paul Magocsi only included Western and Central Ukraine in his Atlas of Central and Eastern Europe.

Today, as Yuriy Kaganov notes, "researchers are faced with the blurred and uncertain nature of the concept of 'Central and Eastern Europe' when considering this issue. The term is used in the lexicon of the modern historical and political sciences to refer to a range of significantly different, sometimes directly opposite, concepts. Debates are caused by its correlation with the concepts of 'Central Europe,' 'Eastern Europe,' 'East-Central Europe,' etc." (Kaganov 2005, 333).

History of the term: Eastern Europe or Central and Eastern Europe?

The concept of Central Europe dates back to the ancient world. For quite a long time, Central Europe was identified with the Holy Roman Empire of the German People. For its part, the concept of Eastern Europe became widespread in the wake of Napoleon's lost war against Russia (Kaganov 2005, 334).

The division of Europe into West and East is relatively recent. Until the 18th century, Europe was considered to be divided into north and south, and topographically this line of division ran through the Alps. This was the vision of Europe held by ancient Romans and, one thousand years later, by Italian thinkers in the Renaissance. It was in the 18th century, the continent started reorienting in people's imagination, which resulted in the north and south being considered philosophically less important poles of the European compass than the east and west. Europe began to perceive itself as divided into East and West, which became the main fundamental orientation of the continent in modern times, until the later 20th century and the end of the Cold War (Wolff, 2009, 20). American historian Larry Wolff believes that French Enlightenment philosophers played a pivotal role in the invention of Eastern Europe. As opposed to his view, the Ukrainian scholar, historian, and publicist Yaroslav Hrytsak argues that the division into East and West has existed for a long time, and it is the oldest cultural division in Europe. It can be traced back to Homer and Herodotus, and since the beginning of the second millennium, the division into the Christian West and the Christian East has been one of the most important and enduring distinctions on the European continent. (Wolff, 2009, 561).

The following centuries saw the emergence of "Middle Europe" as a new concept. This idea began to take shape after Germany unified, "with blood and iron," the northern part of the once mighty Holy Roman Empire—MiddleEurope—into a single Reich in 1871. In this period, real opportunities arose for closer rapprochement between Germany and Austria-Hungary, another Germanic empire. As these empires dissociated themselves from both Western and Eastern Europe, the concept of Middle Europe was developed to denote the separated states (Eberhardt, 2000, 180).

The first quarter of the 20th century was marked by

a “renaissance” of the concept of Central Europe. After 1918, the nations that (re-)established their statehood as a result of World War I (Austria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland) did not want to be part of “Eastern Europe.” These states began to be called “Central Europe.” The commitment to being part of Central Europe came from the countries themselves. In 1921, Tomáš Masaryk used the term “Central Europe” to refer to “a special zone of small nations between the West and the East” (Kaganow, 2005, 335). The invention of this region was supported by Western powers.

After World War II and during the Cold War, the term “Eastern Europe” became widespread. By the end of the 1980s, it had become a geopolitical concept. The notions “real socialism,” “socialist countries,” “socialist commonwealth,” and similar coinages came to be synonymous with the concept of “Eastern Europe” at that time, making the term “Eastern Europe” synonymous with the Soviet bloc.

In the early 1980s, a new fashion for the term “Central Europe” arose as three works by well-known authors „Three Historical Regions of Europe“ by Jeno Szücs, „Family Europe“ by Czesław Miłosz, and „A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe“ by Milan Kundera garnered relative popularity. These thinkers sought to separate their “Central Europe” sharply from the homeland of “real socialism.”

In September 1994, the U.S. State Department issued instructions for its Bureau of European Affairs to use the term “Central Europe” instead of “Eastern Europe.” Gradually, researchers also agreed that the educational value of the term “Eastern Europe” is limited, although it continued to be used in the early 21st century by some researchers who used it to refer to to all post-Soviet countries (Zielonka & Pravda 2001, 568).

During the Cold War, there was no middle ground, and the term “Central Europe” simply stopped being used, but it was revived with the fall of the communist regimes. In the 1990s, the concept of Central Europe became a semi-official doctrine of the West and received its most complete ideological formulation in Samuel Huntington’s framework of the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993).

In the last decades of the 20th century, the educational value of the concepts of “Eastern Europe” and “Central Europe” was limited for political reasons. If the former term was associated with dullness, poverty, and backwardness, the latter became stirred controversy among the candidates for a united Europe. At the turn of the 21st century, the concept of “Central Europe” (“Central and Eastern Europe gained a strong foothold in political rhetoric and historical studies and has since pushed aside, if not replaced “Eastern Europe.” This is quite understandable given that countries in the region were at different stages of joining the European integration project. Seeing this, it was necessary to convey one’s real belonging to Europe in language terms by labeling oneself as “part of the family” while labeling others as “not quite part of the family” (Eastern Europe) (Wóycicki 2016).

To distinguishes the region of “Central and Eastern Europe” or “Eastern and Central Europe” is a widespread approach in Ukrainian historiography today. There is no consensus among researchers on which countries are covered by this term. There are narrow and broad understandings of the region’s composition and boundaries. In the narrow sense, Central and Eastern Europe is limited to four countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. According to the broader understanding, Central and Eastern Europe comprises Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Greece, and Turkey.

Ukrainian historians tend to use the terms “Eastern and Central Europe” and “Central and Eastern Europe” synonymously. It is thus necessary first of all to remove the terminological confusion associated with grammatically inaccurate translations of the widespread English term “East-Central Europe.” According to Ihor Piliaev, this term is most adequately translated as “the eastern part of Central Europe” and obviously does not include either the historical centers of geopolitical gravity, such as Austria and Germany, or the post-Soviet countries in the Eastern European Plain, against the common notion that the term refers to a combination of Eastern and Central Europe (Piliaev, 2013, 21).

Another tendency involves skepticism about the feasibility of bringing together such different countries under one region. For example, Kazimierz Wóycicki argues that the concept of Central and Eastern Europe seems to have exhausted itself

and lost any heuristic or instrumental value (Wóycicki 2016). Rather, there are two subregions: Central Europe and Eastern Europe, which are set apart by their different historical experiences in the 20th century, marked by the impact of two world wars, primarily World War II.

Features of the historic and cultural region

Central and Eastern Europe is a regional construct that has its geographical, historical, ethnocultural, and geostrategic identity and its inherent distinctive features. Notably, the longstanding affiliation of the Central and Eastern European states to the so-called socialist camp made their paths similar and long determined not only their economic relations but also their model of public life. Piotr Wandycz argues that "being a young civilization" is one of the features of this region (Wandycz 1998). It was only in the 10th century that it joined European civilization, which meant that its economic development lagged behind. According to Wandycz, the negative factors that affected the development of the region included poor urban expansion, the delayed formation of capitalist relations, and the belated abandonment of serfdom. Krzysztof Brzechczyn believes that weak industrial development is one of the defining characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe, where in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the majority of the population was still engaged in agriculture (Berzechczyn 1998). Piotr Eberhardt notes that almost all the nations of Central and Eastern Europe were deprived of state independence for a longer or shorter time (Eberhardt, 2000). For example, Poland was partitioned three times in the late 18th century and only regained its sovereignty after World War I in 1918. Similarly, countries such as Hungary and Lithuania had experienced long periods of foreign rule, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the Russian Empire, before they achieved independence in the 20th century. The Balkans and the countries on the Black Sea, such as Ukraine and Romania, also went through repeated changes in territorial control, often finding themselves under the influence or direct rule of neighbor empires. The lack of permanent statehood impacted the political, cultural, and social dynamics of these countries, producing a unique historical context for their modern development. This situation has lastingly influenced their political attitudes, especially regarding sovereignty and national identity. As a result, all the peoples of the region were to a greater or lesser extent united by the idea of resistance to and fight against formally different but essentially the same external invaders and endorsed struggle for national interests as a preeminent idea. At the same time, throughout its history, this part of Europe experienced continual border changes. The lack of stability created an atmosphere of temporariness. The peoples of Central and Eastern Europe felt a constant threat. In the 19th century, the region was among the spheres of influence claimed by foreign empires, primarily Russia, Germany, Austria, and to some extent Turkey, which treated it as a potential territory for their expansion. In all the states of Central and Eastern Europe, objective historical circumstances stemming from repeated annexations, occupations, and repressions bred persistent resentments in their populations. The cultural paradigm of Central and Eastern Europe somewhat differs from that of Western Europe, with the Socratic and Christian notions of a transcendent world of truth, goodness, and justice prevailing in the former. The human is not the measure of things at all, the social contract is not sufficient to define the principles of human coexistence, and the idea of cogito has failed to take root there. Importantly, while the countries of Central and Eastern Europe talk a lot of human rights and civil society, their understanding of these concepts is different from that accepted in the western part of the continent.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Christianity played a dominant role in shaping societal values, especially in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. The idea of a transcendent world, grounded in divine truth and justice, often overshadowed the human-centric philosophies thriving in Western Europe, such as the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, who focused on reason, individual rights, and empirical evidence.

Largely upheld in Central and Eastern Europe, the notion that "the human is not the measure of things" reflects a belief in objective, divine truths, such as moral absolutes, divine justice, and eternal values, that transcend human experience. This stands in contrasts with the Western intellectual tradition, which began to elevate human autonomy and rationality in the Enlightenment, generating concepts such as the social contract (e.g., Rousseau and Hobbes) and Descartes' cogito (""I think, therefore I am"), which center on the individual's capacity for reason as the foundation of understanding the world.

Human rights and civil society are often viewed through

a different historical and cultural lens in Central and Eastern Europe than in the West. For instance, the legacy of communism in many of these countries influences their approach to political and social rights, often triggering tensions between Western liberal ideals and local traditions and experiences. In this region, civil society might be interpreted not only in terms of individual freedoms and rights but also in the context of collective responsibility, national identity, and sometimes stronger ties with the state or with religious institutions.

The different interpretations of these ideas also stem from the historical experiences of these countries. Under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and, more recently, Soviet communism, the societies of Central and Eastern Europe often had to navigate considerably varying political and philosophical realities. This historical backdrop influences how concepts such as human rights are articulated and implemented today, and why their understanding sometimes diverges from that of Western Europe.

This distinction is a reminder of the complexities of cultural and philosophical development across Europe. While the continent shares a common history of intellectual exchange, regional differences in values, historical experiences, and religious traditions continue to shape disparate understandings of key concepts, such as truth, justice, and the role of the individual in society.

Is Europe ready to take on the challenge?

Today, the concept of Central and Eastern Europe is showing its flip side, so to speak. It is like Europe, yet a bit different, not like Germany or France, for example. That is why some rules may not be followed here.

History has examples of the lands of Central European countries being sacrificed for the sake of peace in Western European countries. The historical vicissitudes seemed to justify different rules of the game in the region. Central and Eastern Europe looks like a place to break the rules. Russia, for one, is ready to do it, especially in countries that tend not to be classified as Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Belarus). The countries of Central and Eastern Europe appear to be an internal frontier and are construed as lands to be conquered (albeit in a non-military sense), dominated for one's own interests, and used in any way one chooses. Specifically, recent developments indicate that one can encroach on the territorial integrity of sovereign states here and hope for reformatting the post-communist space.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, division were revealed among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Most of them were able to join the EU and NATO after the collapse of the USSR. This gave them economic and military security (within, respectively, the EU and NATO). Other countries in the region remained stuck between the EU and the Russian Federation (especially Ukraine) (Voznik, 2014).

This is consistent with Yevhen Mahda's observation that the world is divided today into zones of influence between areas of stability, where law and order prevail, and areas of uncertainty and increased potential for conflict (in whatever phase). In Eastern Europe, this line runs across post-Soviet states, which found themselves in the role of "buffer zones" between Russia and the EU after the Cold War. Russia's aggression targets the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states that are members of the Euro-Atlantic integration structures, as well as the countries that are situated in the "gray" safety zone (i.e., Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and, possibly, Belarus) (Mahda 2017).

Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine can to some extent be regarded as a consequence of the "power vacuum" in the post-Soviet space that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, with the imperial ambitions of the Russian Federation leading to its disproportionate distribution. The fact that Ukraine is now successfully resisting Russia's aggression may breed unfounded optimism and overestimation of capacities. Undoubtedly, Ukraine is a powerful opponent of Russia and its aggressive policies, but it is not the only one. Other countries, such as Poland, are also under threat. While they were part of the communist bloc, they were not part of the USSR.

It should be kept in mind that Central and Eastern Europe may become a key region for Europe as a whole. For this reason, it is vital to overcome internal contradictions and build relationships of a different quality. Historical memory should be used not to stir up controversy but to strengthen the common front of confrontation with the hybrid threat from the East.

Conclusion

The term "Central and Eastern Europe" has significantly evolved over time in conjunction with political, historical, and cultural factors. Originally, it provided a way to categorize a geographically distinct area with a shared historical experience, in particular regarding its development under various political systems, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Soviet Union.

The historical significance of the term has been particularly evident since the onset of the Cold War. In its aftermath, the region became central to geopolitics as countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic transitioned from communist regimes to market economies and liberal democracies. The eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO played a crucial role in reshaping the region's political landscape.

The idea of "Central and Eastern Europe" has been used as a political tool in efforts to integrate these countries into Western political and economic structures, as seen in the push for stronger ties between Ukraine and its Western neighbors, including Poland and the Baltic states. This idea was bolstered in the 2000s, with the notion that countries in the region should be more aligned with European and Euro-Atlantic values, particularly in contrast to Russian influence.

Besides, the cultural and historical ties between these countries have fostered a sense of shared identity although what it is exactly that unites them is an object of some debate. The legacy of communism, the struggle for independence, and the impact of national borders often contribute to the complexity of defining a distinctive "Central and Eastern European" identity.

Many questions about how to best understand this region are still unanswered. For example, what cultural commonalities do these countries really share? Should they be viewed through the lens of their unique paths to independence and democracy? How do these historical experiences shape their relationships with the West? How might the region evolve in the context of the current global and regional challenges?

The history of the term "Central and Eastern Europe" shows that one concept can become an instrument of political action to strengthen Ukraine's ties with Poland, the Baltic states, and other Western neighbors. Central and Eastern Europe refers to a particular region whose countries share a cultural history and also serves as a research concept for analyzing a set of problems. The study of the region of Central and Eastern Europe is highly relevant today as it prompts extensive discussions on its formation and development.

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