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MITTELEUROPA/
CENTRAL EUROPE –
FACT OR POLITICAL
HALLUCINATION?
A German
Geographer's
Viewpoint

For quite a while “Mitteleuropa” has been one of the most disputed regional units of Europe among historians, geographers, and politicians. The last time it drew significant attention was in the mid eighties. This was when the initial agony of the Soviet Empire slowly gave way to more discussion about the past and future prospects of countries under eastern hegemonic rule. Kundera's (1985) frequently quoted article about the tragedy of Central Europe (“Die Tragödie Mitteleuropas”) symbolizes this debate. Since then, the revived discussion about “Mitteleuropa” has never ceased, although it is not getting all that much public attention at the moment. So what is “Mitteleuropa”, does it exist or did it exist in the past, what are its borderlines and is there a difference between the German term “Mitteleuropa” and the Anglo-American term “Central Europe”?

These questions cannot be answered easily due to the nature of this topic. Since it is very obvious that discussions about Mitteleuropa/Central Europe/Middle Europe cover the same region, the term should just be seen as different word formulations in different languages for the same thing. Answers to the following questions can be approached in many different ways. Does this “Mitteleuropa” exist or is it just a hallucination or a construction for the purpose of certain political aims? One needs to go back into history and study the changing perceptions of “Mitteleuropa” as well as when the term itself came into use (Ruppert, 1995; Schultz, 1997).

It has been used in the scientific literature, that is, in German geography and public speech since 1808 (Zeune). However, the term itself as well as a common perception of the word are probably even older. For these reasons, it seems that among German speaking people, Europe's largest ethnic group and culture, a concept of a unit with characteristics of its own has been present for about two centuries, making it a relatively long-lasting concept. It

can still be found in almost any Atlas published nowadays. For example, Diercke's newest edition *Weltatlas* (1996) that has been printed for generations in hundreds of thousands of copies and used in all German high schools, has an introductory chapter on Europe that focuses on the physical characteristics, economy, and geology of "Mitteleuropa", although the area's exact borders remain undefined. (The map shows in the east-west direction a region between the Netherlands and the western Ukraine and in the north-south direction it includes an area between southern Denmark and a parallel running approximately along the Bergamo-Zagreb-Hermannstadt line.)

Of course, a German perception will not answer the question "objectively". However, the problem is that *no* answer to this question regarding whether this area exists or not, will be objective. It is a construction as well as a perception. If someone wants its presence, it can be proved. However, if someone wants to prove that it does not exist, it would not be too difficult to provide proof in support of this opinion.

Consequently, is "Mitteleuropa" completely a figment of subjectivity? Without a doubt, many people have different standpoints about what should be included in this "Mitteleuropa". For example, the Central European Initiative (CEI), coordinated in Vienna by an initiative of the Austrian government, includes Central European countries (e.g., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland), as well as countries such as Albania, Moldavia, and the Ukraine in its roundtable discussions, yet Germany is not a member. Only a small minority of informed people would consider those countries to have been an integral part of Central Europe in the past; on the other hand, Germany is not a part of this. Times may change, but the example of the CEI quite clearly shows, that certain actors at specific times come up with various concepts for different political aims, thus defining "their" Central Europe. In all probability, this is not the way to shape a long-term idea of Central Europe, be it within or even outside the continent.

Another example can be found in the work of Kundera and other writers and essayists that constructed their own "Mitteleuropas" in the second half of the eighties. In their constructions, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary were seen as a unit worthy of the label "Mitteleuropa". Suffering for 40 years under an unjust Russian (i.e., Eastern) occupation seemed to be the criteria used here, as these lands have never been a part of Orthodoxy, that is part of Eastern Europe. While these countries

were never an integral part of the Orthodox Europe, the suffering due to the tragic results of World War II was not their exclusive “privilege”.

The idea of this 4 state-unit of “Mitteleuropa”, which is known in German as “Ostmitteleuropa” (Eastern Central Europe), faded away soon after its birth: “*The Springtime of Nations* of 1989 ironically ended with the defeat of the idea of Central Europe and of the intellectual group which propagated it” (Czyzewski, 1997, p. 21). After it became clear that there was a chance to join the process of western/developed European integration, i.e., the EU, talks about a future unity of these countries were seized by urgent attempts to become a part of that prosperous Europe to the west of the former Iron Curtain.

These examples have been given to demonstrate that concepts or constructions of different “Mitteleuropas” were rather short-lived and hardly convincing. They came and went, as political ideas or goals emerged or were replaced by others during a particular period of time. On that account, is any perception of “Mitteleuropa” purely artificial? Not necessarily so – and a number of reasons will be given to create a more precise idea of a durable perception, resulting from a combination of facts, and some rather normative values or matters of perspective. Acknowledging again that there cannot be any really “objective” concept of “Mitteleuropa”, it can be said that this is a problem “Mitteleuropa” shares with all the “facts” defined by the Humanities.

Physical geographers, being natural scientists, are able to prove within a minute or two to anyone who is interested that there is, according to objective criteria, no “Europe” either. A traditional geographer's definition of “Europe”, ending at the Ural Mountains, has been much disputed, and for good reasons, since the twenties. Physically, what we call “Europe” is just the western part of a huge continent of Eurasia. So the notion of a “Europe” is purely a cultural and subjective thing. It is there, if people agree upon this, and it is not there if people want to disagree. Most of us want to agree – the reason being a number of historical developments. In principle, it is the same with “Mitteleuropa”, the only difference being that there are more participants with different interests and “geopolitical codes” that want to participate in the discussion.

Entering the scene from an alternate angle, it is very interesting to note that most people – frequently those who deny the existence of “Mitteleuropa” – also take for granted that there is a Northern Europe (mainly the Scandinavian Peninsula), a Western Europe (Spanish Penin-

sula, France, and Britain), a Southern or Mediterranean Europe (Italy, Greece, etc.), and an Eastern Europe (the Great Plains of the European East). Isn't there quite a high likelihood that there is something in the middle, where all the peninsulas and other peripheral parts stick together? (Who has ever defined or proven, that the north of the south begins immediately where the south of the north comes to an end, changing abruptly along a sharp line and without transition?) There is no clear-cut definition of anything, but a matter of basic thinking and common sense, which should be applied to all regional divisions of Europe, or to any place in the world. It cannot be easily defined whether Spain is a part of western or southern Europe. Probably both, with undefined border regions inside the peninsula, where one cultural landscape slowly fades into the other. The same problem is also applicable to Belgium, Denmark, etc.; such that problems of defining the unit of "Mitteleuropa" are not isolated.

Therefore an attempt to define Central Europe is as legitimate as defining Europe or any other sub-unit as well. Traditionally, different definitions have been used. Sinnhuber (1954) classifies them into four groups according to the criteria applied:

- i) A topographical or positional term
- ii) A physical region, based on one or more criteria of physical elements (compare Dorn, 1960)
- iii) A historical or political concept (e.g., Naumann, 1915)
- iv) A geographical region based on both physical and human elements.

In practice, perceiving "Mitteleuropa" as a unit of its own involves a combination of these criteria. Moreover, it can be shown that a definition based upon the fourth criterion has been in use for a very long time. Old encyclopaedias, e.g., the "Brockhaus" from 1830 or hundreds of quotations in literature support this. Evidently, since early 19th century the understanding of "Mitteleuropa" as an area in the core of Europe has existed and was defined by human elements or criteria that mainly focussed on German culture and language. Hence, wherever German was spoken and wherever Germans lived or ardently influenced science, literature, culture, and/or politics among their eastern neighbours, there was "Mitteleuropa". Historically, it was a "Germany-plus", an area which was settled and developed by Germans, the "Ostsiedlung" or Eastern colonization of the Middle ages; an area, where cities were founded under German law, resulting in the presence of widespread German ethnic groups.

As a result of their numbers, Germans that subsequently came under the Habsburg rule often held high-ranking positions in the cities. Moreover, this refers to an area called “Mitteleuropa” that was promoted by Friedrich Naumann, in his book “Mitteleuropa” (1915) more than a hundred years later, as a political union. Consequently, many have claimed that Naumann was the founder of the “Mitteleuropa-idea”, brought about by the developments before and during the course of World War I. The mistake here is obvious, because the concept of “Mitteleuropa” had already been existent for quite a long time before Naumann published his book. He simply added, under challenging auspices, a plea for the political unification of the area under discussion, which at that time, was still divided between two empires consisting of a number of smaller and larger nations.

Naumann envisaged “Mitteleuropa” in 1915 as an area of the German and Habsburg Empires, “a federation of sovereign countries that would join voluntarily as equal partners on the basis of mutual treaties” (Sinnhuber, 1954, p. 27). This was an area where German was the *lingua franca* and simultaneously an area under German control or influence, combined with the political power of the governments in Berlin and Vienna. This was by no means a truly imperialist concept, but, rather, it reflected a factual state of affairs prior to 1914 in Europe. Considering the Habsburg and German defeats and the Versailles treaty, etc., which completely changed the political map of Europe, one cannot tell if the (later independent) Habsburg countries would have voluntarily joined such a union.

Therefore it is very clear that “Mitteleuropa” can be seen as a unit of Europe that existed at least until World War I. Furthermore, it is debatable whether or not it came to an end as a result of World War I or World War II. Criteria for position and topography did not change, nor did the physical features (see Machatschek, 1925; Schenk, 1995; Ruppert, 1995; Schultz, 1997) nor did most of the cultural artefacts. Most importantly, identification in German speaking countries with “Mitteleuropäer” still seems to be there, so there is no need to preclude “Mitteleuropa” as one of the key units of Europe. It is certainly true that the simplifying, politically based division of Europe into the West (the EU, NATO, the developed Europe) and the East (the Transition Europe, the former WP, the ruined Europe) is still there (Klemenčić, 1997, p. 16), imposing itself over the more precise breakdown of the continent into basic units with particular historical backgrounds. It will

take time to change that. However, the decisions at Jalta clearly will not be the last word of history.

The disappearance of the Iron Curtain and its sharp borderline will result, in the long run, in a restoration of more “natural” spatial structures with gradual transition from one economic, cultural, and linguistic entity into another. An exact borderline in phenomena dealing with human life can never be drawn, unless a situation is very artificial and due to a violent imposition (“pure Serbian” territories of the so-called Serbian Krajina or in Kosovo are contemporary examples). Historically based cultural differences in Europe between places which are more than 2,000 km apart, like West-European Madrid and the Central East European Warsaw, will remain a part of the European future.

Today's “Mitteleuropa” and its extent, can no longer be defined by the old recipe of “German speaking countries plus”. German is no longer the *lingua franca* of the commerce world and definitely not the foremost culture among its western neighbours. Political power and more than that, the will to exercise it, is completely gone (compare Tietze, 1989, p. 175), as well as most of the German ethnic groups in the East after mass expulsions following the defeat of Germany in 1945. Germany's (south-)eastern neighbors that were mainly under Habsburgian rule until 1914 became completely independent nations. Thus, “Mitteleuropa” nowadays seems to consist of two parts: Germany, or the area where the German language is spoken constituting its western half (Westmitteleuropa), and a number of small or medium-sized nations between Germany and a line somewhere to the west of the River Bug and the Carpathian Mountains (Ostmitteleuropa). Halecki (1957) also shared this opinion.

Perhaps in the future, both parts of “Mitteleuropa” will become closer as they were before the tragic events of the “World Wars” seen by many modern historians as European Civil Wars with an interference of Semi and Non-European Powers. Conceivably, Germany's role as the largest European nation, clearly a part of the West, in a political sense, may once again be that of a mediator of advanced “western” developments, becoming the long missing link between the confronted West and the East of the old continent. For all these reasons, it might be too early to abandon the concept of “Mitteleuropa” completely.

Hence, the question, which regions in the transitional zones between the macro-units should be considered to be a part of this or that unit, remains disputable. For exam-

ple, historical/cultural reasons will make it possible to see large portions of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as parts of Ostmitteleuropa. Undisputedly, from a German geographer's viewpoint, the position of Croatia belongs in its (semi-)Pannonian parts decisively to the middle-European tradition and culture, while its western, Adriatic parts belong to the Mediterranean culture. In a similarly complicated way, this is what we encounter in a continent with centuries of history and many differences. Or, as the Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan said: "The study of space, from the humanistic perspective, is a study of a people's spatial feelings and ideas in a stream of experience."

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