

ARTICLES

NOTES ON CENTRAL EUROPE FROM
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The following article is an attempt to establish whether the Central Europe of the 20th century is indeed a specific, internally homogenous socio-cultural macro-region. Two mutually complementary approaches were used. One is an analysis of the measure of homogeneity of countries referred to as central Europe by means of selected structural features in two periods of the 20th century. The other is a measurement of the level of interaction among individual Central European countries in three periods during the 20th century. The other analysis, dealing with the intensity of interactions, was limited to the investigation of trends of mutual trade exchange. Central Europe was represented in these analyses by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary and Poland. The results of both approaches applied indicate that in terms of certain structural features, Central Europe has always been a relatively homogenous and specific European macro-region. However, the level of this structural homogeneity has changed according to historical, especially political, conditions. This historical variability was validated also by partial analysis of the interaction. Central Europe continues to exist as a unique and rather loosely structured macro-region of Europe. Although this not a significant bearing, numerous surveys show it is not negligible, either. The region obviously achieved the highest level of homogeneity and interaction in the latter half of the 19th century and the 1910s.

Keywords: Central Europe, social and structural analysis, historical sociology, structural features of Central Europe, development of Central Europe

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Introduction

Few topics of European geopolitics and political historiography received greater attention, in the 20th century, than the issue of Central Europe. This fact alone indicates that this part of Europe was, in that century, a source of tensions and conflicts, which were subsequently reflected by cogitations often bill-boarded as “rediscovering Central Europe” (Judt 1990) or by attempts to find political and economic solutions, which would usher peace and stability into the region. A bibliography of monographs and essays by European and non-European authors, dealing with this issue, would doubtless run into countless volumes. The logical question is, then, if the new findings can really be added to what has been said and debated. I believe an innovative approach could assume the form of an attempt to grasp the concept of Central Europe from the vantage point of historical (Gellner 2000; Mann 1993; Smith 1991) and regional sociology (Musil 2005). Being an analytically and theoretically based discipline, sociology could highlight some of the hitherto neglected aspects of the phenomenon called Central Europe and help us to assume a realistic view of this topic.

“Central Europe” as a concept may be taken purely in geographic confines, either as a part of Europe situated somewhere in the middle of the Continent, or somewhere *between* western and eastern Europe – hence the term “Mezzo-Europe” (from German *Zwischeneuropa*) – but also as the organic “heart” of Europe or, in political and social science terms, as a macro-region of Europe that displays certain societal features that set it apart from the rest of Europe. The historical dimension of this approach is based on the assumption that a macro-region is not an unchanging entity; it may have stemmed from a specific situation but may cease to exist in another situation. Moreover, this historical-social science approach will shed more light on the intensity of integration and the importance of the individual facets of Central European integration in various epochs of history.

The following notes mainly concern the Central Europe of the second half of the 20th century and the present era. It is, however, necessary to point out that Europe’s regionalization has always had its historical contexts. This is ev-

idenced by the roughly two centuries old example of a view on European divisions, given below. Therefore, one should always know that the current concept of Central Europe is also the product of the contemporary constellations and interpretations of political, economic and social structures.

Many vintage considerations about the articulation of Europe point to a strong historical context. In the past, Europe was long divided between its south and north, and the former – specifically the Latinate Mediterranean region – was considered the original core of Europe. To quote a less well-known example, Hegel distinguished between three parts of Europe, in his “Die Vernunft in Der Geschichte. Einleitung in der Philosophie der Weltgeschichte” (ed. 1917), which was based on his lectures in 1822–1824. One was the *south of Europe*, comprising the territory south of the Pyrenees, southern France, Italy and territories south of the Danube. He divided in two parts the territory north of the Alps. One of them, which he called the *heart of Europe*, is to the west. It comprises Germany, France, Denmark and Scandinavia. The other part of the north of Europe, according to Hegel, is the *Northeast of Europe*. This covers the flatlands inhabited by Slavs and comprises Russia and Poland. He stressed that this northwest of Europe had always connected Europe with Asia. At any rate it is safe to assume that the positioning of Central Europe on the east-west axis is a fairly recent phenomenon, doubtlessly associated with the new geopolitical relationships forming at the end of the 1800s and especially during the 1900s.

It follows that Central Europe should be studied, first of all, whether it has existed or does exist today as a phenomenon apart from the rest of Europe, and second, to discern the features that make it specific. We ask if Central Europe existed as a specific and identifiable modality of European culture, economy and political system, and if so, why. Any sociologist admitting the existence of such a social entity must inevitably determine its specific content, and being equipped with the knowledge of these specifics, he must be able to determine its *boundaries*. However, any social group and any community display a remarkably more complex nature than any physical or biological subjects do.

Comprehensive social regionalization and the dimensions of social-space regions of Europe

In this rendition and in the confines of the Durkheim-Halbwachs social morphology (Halbwachs 1960), Central Europe is the social-space part of a greater whole. It can be identified also as one of the social macro-regions of Europe

(cf. Musil 2005). The permanence or transiety of such a social-space element stands out as the second basic question. It is inspired by Braudel’s (1949) essays on the “Mediterranean Region” and the relationships between historiography and social sciences, in which the author started to distinguish between three categories of time. They are “long time”, i.e. geographic time; “social time”, and “the time of events”, i.e. individual time. It is safe to ask if Central Europe is a long-time phenomenon, such as Braudel’s Mediterranean, or a social-space element existing in social time. However, the core analytical problem is the delimitation of the European macro-region called Central Europe and the method of arriving at this delimitation.

Two complementary approaches to what is described as comprehensive social regionalization could be applied in order of such delimitation. One of them demarcates a macro-region on the basis of the *homogeneity of selected features* characteristic of a certain space, whereas the second approach centers on the *intensity of interactions* (of various contents) between the parts of this macro-region, which must be more intense than the outward interaction.

Inner homogeneity of macro-regions can be assessed by a range of criteria, in particular:

- Geographical parameters (climate, land morphology, position vis-a-vis important elements, such as sea etc.)
- Settlement patterns and socio-demographic characteristics (population density, settlement density, level of urbanization, population growth, household structure etc.)
- Economic characteristics (dominant economic activities, economic performance, agriculture, industry etc.)
- Political and economic (types of state set-up, internal administrative units, selfmanagement, also continuity and discontinuity of states, etc.)
- Character of legal system
- Cultural features (religion, language, cognitive and value orientation)
- Material culture and lifestyles (architecture, cities, arts etc.)

It should be noted that from the vantage point of the functionalistic-historical theory, the above order of dimensions is not indicative of their permanent causal significance. Thus, the cultural or legal dimensions may, under certain conditions, carry a greater causal importance for the delienation of macro-regions than the economic conditions. However, there indeed exists a measure of correlation among all these dimensions. It is, for instance, an undisputed fact that the wealth of cultural activities correlates with the economic and political situation of a region.

The intensity of interaction within a macro-region can be measured particularly by the:

- Level of economic exchange;
- Mobility of people (marriages, labour mobility, migration, visits, tourism etc.);
- Level of political interaction (institutionalized cooperation, but also animosities, tensions and conflicts).

A sociological analysis of Europe by means of the two principles would, in my view, lead to more reliable revelations about the basic divisions of Europe than the intuitive – albeit the frequently quite inspiring, interesting but unverified observations of writers, artists and, let's face it, historians. Were it possible to make such deep "incisions" into the socio-spatial structure of Europe in its various epochs, we would obtain a more reliable picture about the Continent's structure than the one we work with today.

A note should be made on the above-mentioned consideration. Even though the structural-functionalistic analysis emphasizes the so-called objective facets of the regionalizing dimension, it does not imply that it completely ignores the subjective facets, i.e. subjective perceptions, attitudes and mainly the subjective construction of macro-regional identities. These regions doubtlessly also exist as regions imagined both individually and collectively.

The collectively imagined regions have in the past played an important political role in delimiting regions in Europe, especially so in delimiting the concept of Central Europe. The *Mittleuropa* of Friedrich Naumann in 1915 was the reflection of the contemporary German liberal concept of a Central Europe under German hegemony. In contrast, T. G. Masaryk's "New Europe", published in Czech in 1920, was a geopolitical outline of the "Slavic attitude", as suggested by its subtitle. Similarly, exiled Czechoslovak, Hungarian and Polish intellectuals in the Communist era formulated their geopolitical concept of Central Europe as an instrument of their struggle for the renewal of cultural, social and by implication also political identity vis-à-vis the region's new hegemonic ruler, the Soviet Union. The proof of this is found in numerous publications, such as the Hungarian attitude in the volumes of Francis S. Wagner (1970) and Stephen Borsody (1993) or the Czech and Slovak outlines of Central Europe in *A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, published by Ladislav Matějka in the United States in the 1980s. Similar examples of ideological constructions for Central Europe, almost all of which bear political connotations, were manifold in the recent and not too distant past.

However, the emphasis on ideological construction should not, in my view, lead to the suppression of efforts to find objective structural evidence of the shared and different features of the region we choose to call Central Europe.

The findings about social homogeneity and interaction within the macro-region, supplemented by social and cultural imaginations about it, are very likely to help paint the most dependable sociological picture of Central Europe.

Brief summary of core structural features of Central Europe

My Notes on Central Europe subscribe to the classic analysis by Karl A. Sinnhuber (1954), who evaluated a number of attempts to delineate the macro-region. I see a Central Europe as a territory formed by the Czech Lands, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary and Poland. The following summary is based on the statistical analyses, politological analyses and geographic surveys used in my course on the "Varieties of Contemporary European Cultures" taught at the Central European University (CEU) in Warsaw, in 2001–2003.

Geographic parameters – Fernand Braudel sometimes described long time as a geographic time. He strove to highlight both the anthropological and economic significance of geographic conditions. The Central European climate is half way between the coastal climate of northwestern Europe and the continental climate of Eastern Europe and Russia. This projected into longer winters and had an impact on agriculture and its intensity. Crop yields in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary were lower than in Western Europe, and those in the Czech Lands and Austria were broadly comparable to the yields in Germany and France. In the pre-industrial times, this projected into lower population densities than in the broad belt from South England to Central Italy. The countries of Central Europe had either no access at all, or limited access, to the sea. The modern Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria and Hungary form a cluster of landlocked countries. This is an important formative feature of the region. In spite of the said common features, the natural and especially geographical conditions of individual countries that form Central Europe differ from case to case; the contrast between the Alpine regions of Austria and the plains of the north-eastern part of Poland is considerable, and the same applies to the contrast between mountainous Slovakia and the flatlands of southern Hungary.

Settlement characteristics – Population density in the modern Central Europe has always been somewhat lower than that of Western Europe. The Czech Lands, with their higher levels of density, have been something of a departure from the rule. The level of urbanization of this space has been lower than in Western Europe, and especially the number of big cities with populations over 100,000 was lower. Urbanization came late, and Central Europe's degree of urbanization has only recently approached the West European trend. Central Eu-

rope is rather heterogenous in terms of its settlement patterns, whereas a low level of urbanization has been its shared feature. Demographic revolution took place much earlier in the Czech Lands and Austria than in Poland and Slovakia, which is why for a considerable period in time, the fertility data were higher in the latter than in the former. Another significant feature, which also divided Central Europe, was the size of households and families. Households were usually bigger in most parts of Poland and Slovakia, where the “wider family” model survived longer. This was associated with a number of economic and legal elements, specific for the eastern part of the region.

Economic characteristics – Industrialization arrived later in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, and with the exception of the Czech Lands, a part of Austria and Poland’s Silesia, the region’s economy relied chiefly on agricultural production and industries depending on the processing of farm produce. In many parts of Central Europe, industrialization did not arrive until the socialist era, and was out of date. The growth of the tertiary sphere came late and was weak; and the post-communist countries have only recently begun to approximate the parameters of Western Europe. Austria is an exception as it shows one of the highest levels of tertiary sector development in Europe. The modern Central Europe, if Austria is included, is economically a very heterogenous territory. Certain similarities exist among the post-communist countries. Central Europe is currently experiencing an economic growth the rate of which is higher than Western Europe’s. However, the per capita GDP gap between Western Europe and the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe is still very wide.

Political and institutional dimension – This is a set of very important characteristics, gradually emerging within the framework of various political constellations of the region. In spite of running the risk of simplification, I use, in this survey, Georg Schöpflin’s summation of political traditions of Eastern Central Europe, from 1990. The system of reciprocity and autonomy of law got a traditionally weak treatment in the region, while the tradition of the decision-making power of the state was strong; even the constitution was largely a façade while individual political rights were weak; in contrast, the position and influence of the elites was strong; the modernization of political cultures was technocratic and lacked the appreciation of the values that stand for modernization. Other features were the lack of pronounced autonomous spheres and centres of influence, i.e. a weak civic society, which projected into implementing most political and economic reforms from above; and an accompanying feature was a strong bureaucratic state, which, e.g. in Poland or Hungary, was the last resort for the declining nobility. Modern entrepreneurship and the tendency to prefer consensus at all costs were parts of this institutional and political culture. The political position of townhalls was also weak, and the contrast between the

city and the countryside duly projected into political life. The region’s agrarian parties were the strongest in Europe and possessed populist tendencies (cf. Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Central Europe also displayed specific features of bureaucratization in the sense of Weber, i.e. there still remained a strong personality-based concept, and the bureaucracy was not very professional and was distanced from the citizen, whereas informal networks were of major significance. This type of political structure and culture was enabled by the existence of traditionally-oriented farmers, the emphasis on the ascriptive system of values, the strong influence of communities, and strong social control. In many countries there was no independent intelligentsia (Bildungsbürgertum) and strong bourgeoisie. Especially in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, the influence of workers and their political parties was weak. However, Schöpflin often points out that his conclusions not always apply to the Czech Lands. By that, he hints at the existence of a strong institutional and political heterogeneity of the region. In the inter-war period, when authoritarian regimes were installed in Poland, Hungary and partially also Austria, no significant change occurred except for Czechoslovakia. The communist regimes basically strengthened the traditional features of the Central European political cultures and institutions, although the Central European societies had undergone radical economic and social restructuring. Austria, which had been able to develop its own liberal-corporatist concept of political processes since 1955, was left aside. The new democratic regimes in the post-communist countries have grappled, since 1989, with these traditional features of a social, political and legal order enhanced by the authoritarian elements inherited from the communist era. In an extent, these regimes caused a degree of institutional homogenization – especially of their economic and political institutions. It is therefore safe to say that in general, Central Europe represents a specific amalgam of traditional political structures inherited from the centuries-long Habsburg tenure and supplemented by structures dating from the Sovietization era. Again, it may be necessary to consider the somewhat different patterns of these structures in terms of Austria and the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, it is safe to hypothesize that this area of features displays a fairly high level of similarities or analogies and represents, in spite of the said differences, a certain – albeit hardly quantifiable – level of homogeneity and thus also specificity of this European macro-region. Another important connecting feature is the exceptional discontinuity of the political frameworks and regimes experienced by the Central European societies since the late 19th century. This has had long-term consequences in the form of general distrust in politics among the region’s population.

After 1989, the political elites of three post-communist countries of Central Europe decided to establish closer cooperation ties within the Visegrad Group.

It seems, however, that the political orientations and interests of its member countries vis-à-vis, say, the European Union, are rather heterogenous. Nevertheless, as indicated by many institutional elements, including a joint fund in support of the research of issues concerning Central Europe indicates there are also some common interests and efforts to coordinate policies.

Nature of legal system – Many legal aspects were hinted at in the previous summary of institutional features of the macro-region. It is opportune to emphasize that the region was, at the same time, part of a strong legal culture, stemming from the Austro-Hungarian version of the Roman law paradigm. This legal order was a powerful unifier, although the Austrian and Hungarian versions differed from one another. These differences were manifested e.g. by different legal systems in the Czech Lands and Slovakia after an independent Czechoslovakia came into being in 1918. The efforts to unify the two legal systems continued until after 1945. This deeper bedrock of a common legal paradigm, emanating from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, is probably in action even today, homogenizing the macro-region.

Cultural features – Central Europe is a region where, until about the middle of the 19th century, i.e. until nationalism began to rear its head, various ethnic groups lived in virtual harmony. This was enhanced also by the multi-ethnic character of the Habsburg Empire. The majority populations, e.g. Czechs, Hungarians and Poles, lived together, without much conflict, with Germans, Jews, and Croats etc. Urban areas were especially heterogenous in ethnic terms. The coexistence of various ethnic groups was formative of specific intellectual and art cultures, as evidenced by e.g. Prague (German Jewish literature existing in parallel with Czech literature), Budapest (strong Jewish Hungarian culture), and Vienna, where all ethnic groups met and mutually stimulated themselves. The intellectual excellence of the *fin de siècle* Vienna is hardly imagined without this cultural mix (cf. Schorske 1981). The nationalism of the latter half of the 19th century, and the fall of Austria-Hungary at a later date, radically changed the situation, and national issues, together with the relations between the states created after 1918 emerged as the neuralgic element of the whole region. Conservative authors (cf. e.g. Fejtő 1998) consider the “undoing of Austria-Hungary” a source of unrest, instability and conflict in Central Europe, which eventually led to the Second World War. Czech and Polish historians (cf. eg. Křen 2005; Wandycz 1998) view the situation differently. Ethnic problems are still a problem for the macro-region.

From the angle of religious structure, the region is fairly homogenous, with Catholicism prevailing either in its traditional church version (Poland and partly also Slovakia and Hungary) or in its cultural variation (Czech Lands). Protestantism as a culturally differentiating force is a limited factor in Hungary,

Slovakia and the Czech Republic. On the whole, it is safe to say that Catholicism in its church and cultural guises has been a homogenization factor in Central Europe.

Another element of shared spiritual orientation under the Soviet hegemony in the eastern part of Central Europe was the resistance of the region's leading intellectuals against the Soviet domination. The cultivation of cultural and spiritual togetherness of Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles vis-à-vis Soviet power by the works of such widely dissimilar authors as Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Adam Michnik and Czesław Miłosz, also became a political weapon in the struggle to preserve the specific identity of the region. However, the interest in the common spiritual roots began to dwindle after 1989. It is often reduced nowadays to vying for funds to restore cultural monuments and gain positions within the European Union. However, the “old” EU Member States often perceive us as a single group.

Material culture and lifestyle – Historians of architecture and urban sociologists agree that centuries of existence of the Habsburg monarchy and a single state, legal and institutional framework created what might be described as the Austro-Hungarian town-planning and architecture style. This was especially obvious in the cities, whereas the countryside retained its specific features formed by climate, agriculture, ownership and other factors. The Austrian or Hungarian standard was most apparent in towns with many public buildings. This is evidenced by the style similarity of buildings such as schools, town halls, theatres, museums, courts, market-halls, stock exchanges, railway stations and big apartment houses. Especially buildings from the latter half of the 19th and early 20th century are strong proofs of a shared cultural pattern. This includes standard colours of facades, window-frames, doors etc. There were, of course, various ethnic architectural revolts against the Viennese style. The stylistic similarity ceased to exist after 1918. By queer analogy, the short-lived Soviet era managed to form Central European cities in a similar way. This could be described as the socialist variant of Fordism in architecture – or the application of mass industrial production to civil engineering. Lately, trends towards greater diversity of individual countries have again prevailed in the region.

As yet there are no comparative studies about the lifestyles of Central European countries in the various peripeties of the dramatic 20th century. However, sociological imagination allows us to hypothetically claim that the lifestyles did not experience as much style-forming “homogenization”, in the integrating Habsburg period, as architecture did. The same could be said about the next period, which purposefully strove for intellectual and cultural unification on the basis of Marxism. The lifestyles of all three socialist countries of Central Eu-

rope preserved their remarkable specific features, although it must be said that some of the officially encouraged forms of the “socialist way of life” were quite similar. Austria, of course, remained sequestered from such trends. It is therefore safe to say that the homogenizing impact of Austria-Hungary on the material structure of towns and their architecture, and on some material elements of lifestyle, such as cafes, parks etc., is still very apparent even today. However, the individual lifestyles within the region are quite different.

A small study in the internal homogeneity of Central Europe in two periods of the 20th century

Several relatively reliable demographic, geographic and economic data from the period between the two great wars in Dudley Kirk’s forgotten “Europe’s Population in the Interwar Years” (1946) and analogous data from the present (Human Development Report 1999) made it possible to compare the level of heterogeneity of the group of countries my paper considers as Central European and Western European. Central Europe was in the interwar period in my analysis represented by Czechoslovakia, Austria and Poland. In the comparisons dealing with present time situation I had to use instead of Czechoslovakia the data for Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. Western Europe was represented, in the inter-war period, by England and Wales, Belgium, France, Germany and Denmark. At present, England and Wales are substituted for by the United Kingdom.

I used the simple measure of variation (variation coefficient) of several economic, demographic and geographic indicators to compare the heterogeneity levels of the countries of Central Europe and selected countries of Western Europe. The results are presented in the Table 1.

Some general conclusions can be made on the face of the survey above and other data, which are not presented here. One is the finding that the Central Europe of my definition as more homogenous, in the inter-war period, than the set of countries representing Western Europe. The fairly high homogeneity of Central Europe was due to the fact that Austria did not dramatically differ from the other countries at that time, from the viewpoint of the indicators used. Although there were differences among the other countries of the region, they were not too pronounced. The second conclusion is the finding that at present, Central Europe is more internally differentiated than the set of West European countries. This is obviously due above all to Austria’s remarkably distancing itself from the other Central European countries. My third conclusion, based on the comparison of values of the variation coefficients of three identical indi-

Table 1—Selected indicators of heterogeneity level of Central and West European countries in two periods of the 20th century

Indicators used	Country differences in			
	1937		1997	
	smaller in CE ^a	bigger in CE	smaller in CE ^a	bigger in CE
Percentage of employees in industry ^b	•			
Percentage of agricultural population ^b	•			
Percentage of urban population		•	•	
Population density per km ²	•			
Population growth		•		•
Median life expectancy at birth	•			•
Preventable deaths ^c	•			
Real GDP per capita				•
Gross investment level as % of GDP				•
Electricity consumption per capita				•
Total	5	2	1	5

^a CE = Central Europe

^b No reliable data available for CE countries, no variation coefficient calculated for 1997

^c Preventable deaths indicator calculated based on the Netherlands death rate in 1937

cators for both periods under surveillance (not presented here), is that the differences between the countries defined as Central European and those representing Western Europe are diminishing. In both regions, there is underway the homogenization of certain sociological indications, including the level of urbanization, the rate of population increase, and the life expectancy at birth. This proves the general hypothesis about the gradual formation of an internally more homogenous Europe.

Notes on interaction between the countries of the region

Alternately, the existence of a macro-region can be delineated by examining interactions between its individual parts. It is safe to say that this approach to defining regions is more significant than the approach relying on the similarity of parts of the region. The problem is that there is significantly less relia-

ble data on such interactions than on structural characteristics. Data on foreign trade is the most complete and dependable; data on migration is less well complete, and there is even less complete other data, such as on marriages of partners from different countries, the number of book translations, etc. A study of this aspect of forming Central Europe would be quite difficult to provide, and it could not be conducted for the purpose of these notes.

Let me therefore limit myself to the basic consideration of foreign trade in three historical periods from the vantage point of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, assuming that similar changes took place, during the 20th century, also in other Central European countries.

Table 2—Six countries with which Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic have conducted intensive foreign trade exchange

Rank	Interwar period (1937)	Socialist era (1980)	Present era (1994–2002)
1	Germany	USSR	Germany
2	USA	GDR	Slovakia
3	Great Britain	FRG	Austria
4	Austria	Hungary	Poland
5	Romania	Yugoslavia	France
6	France	Austria	United Kingdom

Source: Author

The Czech Lands frequently changed their trade relations in the 20th century, and it is obvious that the political framework, within which they developed, was an important factor. Even so, geographical nearness played an important part, as evidenced by the fact that Czechs have always had intensive trade relations with Germany, Austria and Slovakia (a constituent part of Czechoslovakia until 1993). Nonetheless, neither Poland nor Hungary, the countries considered a part of the Central European macro-region, have not belonged to intensive trade contacts over the period under scrutiny. It is safe to conclude that similarly variable economic relations prevailed among the other Central European countries. Consequently, the countries we call Central European may not have had strong mutual economic relations. They probably formed a more consistent economic unit in the Austro-Hungarian era than ever later, and at present.

Similar findings would probably apply also to other forms of interaction, especially migration and inter-marriage, the exchange of intellectual and art goods, but less likely to tourism, where geographical nearness is still an important factor.

Even a sketchy analysis of the interactive dimension has shown that the concept of Central Europe changed during the 20th century and depended largely on the political context as well as geopolitical constellations.

Core questions about the existence and position of Central Europe and the answers that serve as conclusions

I have selected, from the rich reference literature on Central Europe and on the face of the above-mentioned partial analyses, the following seven sociologically most relevant questions, to which I will attempt to give answers. These answers could be taken for the conclusions of some of my analyses and thoughts about Central Europe.

At the same time, however, I am fully aware that, given the complexity and ramifications of the issue, politologists or historians would consider additional questions to be elementary. In an effort to preserve the sociological perspective, I have asked the following:

1. What territories are most often considered a part of Central Europe?
2. When, in the history of the continent, did Central Europe emerge as the specific socio-cultural macro-region labelled in this way?
3. What historical milestones were the most important for the development of Central Europe?
4. When was Central Europe a real, identifiable economic whole?
5. When was Central Europe a real political and legal whole?
6. When was Central Europe a real socio-cultural whole?
7. Is there a Central Europe today, existing as a specific and identifiable macro-region of Europe?

What is most frequently considered Central Europe?

The analysis of papers on the geography of Central Europe leads to the conclusion that Central Europe is most often comprised of the territories of Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, and Slovakia. Some authors add Poland, Slovenia, and sometimes also Croatia. In a yet broader rendition, Germany and Switzerland were considered parts of Central Europe in the past. A singular study ranks France as a Central European country. Some authors, e.g. the Polish historian Halecki (1950), distinguish between Western Europe, East and West Central Europe, and Eastern Europe. This classification has become deeply rooted and is often used today. A very similar regionalization was presented, 30 years later, by the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs (1983, 1985). He divided Europe into three

parts – western, central-eastern and eastern. According to Halecki, the western part of Central Europe, comprising Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, is sometimes referred to as the Alpine countries. Under this concept, East Central Europe consists of Poland, the Czech Lands, Slovakia and Hungary. However, the inclusion of Germany to the Alpine countries is a little imprecise as the north of Germany has more affinity to Scandinavia or north east Europe than the Alps. At present, virtually no authors consider Germany a part of Central Europe, and most authors do not include Austria, either. For most part, these countries are taken for a part of Western Europe. It is, however, necessary to note that Friedrich Naumann regarded Germany as the core of Central Europe, whereas as late as 1986, many Austrian authors, especially Erhard Busek and Emil Brix, considered Austria a part of Central Europe and strove for a political project of Central Europe with an integrating role of Austria.

Evidently, the demarcation along the west-east axis is more difficult than along the north-south axis. This is because the “Nordic” macro-region is partially separated from Central Europe by the Baltic Sea, and Italy is separated by the Alps. The inclusion of France presents a problem, as does the occasional inclusion of the Baltic States in Central Europe. It shows that the geographic definition of Central Europe has always been variable and depended on its author’s domicile. Thus, Hungarian authors frequently extended Central Europe in the southeastern direction, towards the Balkans.

Yet despite all these variegations it is evident that the core of the above-mentioned component parts of Central Europe always included – especially before World War II – three countries without access to the sea, namely Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. A finer, more sociologically oriented definition would exclude Ruthenia, along with parts of Slovakia and Hungary. In today’s terms, east Central Europe is comprised of the Visegrad Group while the Alpine countries form western Central Europe. However, many authors would insist that Germany, as well as Austria and Switzerland today belong to Western Europe and it makes no sense to talk about a western Central Europe. All these examples go to show that it was difficult to geographically delimit Central Europe any time politically defined territories, i.e. states, were strictly used in the process.

When was the concept of Central Europe introduced?

Historians most often date the first probable use of this concept to the Vienna Peace Congress following the defeat of Napoleon. That congress described the territories of the modern Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and Netherlands as *Europe intermédiaire*. This was close to the term *Mittleuropa*, used in the

German cultural space. B. Hnízdo refers to this fact in a very informed way, in his paper. Many French authors, including Jacques Le Rider (1994), treat Central Europe as the German *Mittleuropa*. Even though many papers trace nineteenth-century publications referring to central or middle Europe, it is virtually certain that this concept was mainly used in the 20th century. This was not accidental as several European empires had collapsed, the chief of which was the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. Hence, Central Europe is a concept that reflects dramatic changes in the geopolitical system of the Continent after the first and second world conflagrations.

Milestones of Central European history

Jacques Le Rider notes that “Central Europe, as a subject theme of German and indeed also European history of ideas, surfaces most often when the German-speaking civilization experiences a crisis or a radical change of its geopolitical identity.” This could be extended to the crises and problems of identity or geopolitical orientation of the countries neighbouring Germany or those situated between Germany and Russia. Masaryk’s “New Europe” of 1918 is a cogent proof. Masaryk was realistic enough to conclude that the demise of the Habsburg monarchy and the division of its territory among a number of successor states would necessitate the forming of a democratic new federative entity in order to prevent chaos and disintegration in the space between Germany and Russia. One of the historical milestones that decisively contributed to the formation of the Central European idea was the revolution in 1848, which spurred the rise of Czech Austroslavism, whose federal outlines were expressed by František Palacký and many other Czech politicians and thinkers. It was basically a concept of “new Central Europe”, 19th century style. Of no smaller importance was the forming of the “Second German Empire” under Bismarck, the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1918, followed by the Versailles system, and ultimately the second defeat of Germany in 1945, associated with Soviet (let’s face it, Russian) expansion into Central Europe. Finally, the USSR lost the Cold War in 1989. All these twists and turns of European history had their specific geopolitical repercussions, not least for the grasping of the concept of Central Europe.

When was Central Europe a real economic whole?

In this part, we deal mainly with the interactive bondages applicable to the modern societies. We essentially ask to what degree the economic interactions within the given political entity were more intense than those aiming outward

of the system. Even at the risk of not being able to sum up, within this constricted space, all the literature dealing with the economic integration of the space defined as Central Europe, it is safe to arrive at a generalization of sorts. If we consider the Austro-Hungarian Empire the entity that covered the most part of the macro-regions now called Central Europe, then the highest level of economic integration, or single market, was achieved in this space in the second half of the 19th century and early in the 20th century. It was so even though this space faced various economic problems after the 1873 crisis. Even despite these problems, it was a period of remarkable economic interaction among the various parts of this vast territory.

In the wake of disintegration of this entity after 1918, individual national economies became closed and essentially stagnant, and they had to switch over to geographically different export orientations. Thus, Czech Lands lost their traditional export markets in Austria and Hungary and in the Balkans, and were forced to find alternative export regions.

The end of World War II necessitated another deep restructuring of economic orientations. Although this further re-orientation came hand in hand with central planning and the effort to coordinate the East Central European economies, it was not an integration of the Central European region but the submission of this region to a system dominated by the Soviet Union. The Central European economic space was dismantled. Moreover, the socialist countries were protractedly subjected to the philosophy of individual autarkies, to be later replaced with the tendency towards integration based on labour division within the Comecon confines.

Post-1989 has necessitated a further re-orientation built around economic integration with the European Union and, in the Central European space, establishing strong economic relations with Germany, while retaining the relatively strong interaction of the Central European countries. Again, this is shown by the foreign trade statistics of the Czech Republic, in which Slovakia and Poland continue to play a major part. However, this is not to say that a relatively independent Central European economic zone is in the making. The strong European single market allows only so much regionally oriented interaction. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and partly also Poland, are increasingly becoming parts of an all-European economic space.

When was Central Europe a real political and legal whole?

The answer is similar to the question above, even though the penetration of one and the same legal system into the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire was slower and more complex than the forming of the empire's single economic

market. But again, at the cost of some simplification, it is safe to say that the Austro-Hungarian power and legal structure, by virtue of its insistence on conservative bureaucratic procedures, centralization and preservation of some elements of feudal frameworks, moulded the entity taken for Central Europe into a fairly strongly integrated unit. However, because of its inability to modernize and to absorb the growing nationalism and transform itself into a federative state, this unit started to implode long before the end of the 19th century. Political tensions of not only ethnic but also social character were boiling over and the final decades of the monarchy cannot really be taken for a period of functional political integration.

The end of World War I ushered the process further political disintegration of the Central European space, and the Franco-Czechoslovak attempts to prevent that by forming the Little Entente pact proved ineffective. The Second World War, its aftermath, and especially the Soviet dominance in this space, in conjunction with the local totalitarian regimes rendered impossible any attempts at a legitimate political integration.

The falling apart of the Soviet empire and the integration in the European and Atlantic political and military structures, approved of by the decisive majority of Central European citizens, was not always accompanied by the parallel development of modern legal systems and rule of law states. It should be noted, from the perspective of our question, that some features of old and often conservative regional legal cultures have survived and – with a measure of risk of generalization – there proceeded the Europeanization of political and legal structures but not the strengthening of their Central European character.

When was Central Europe a real socio-cultural whole?

This is one of the most interesting questions of this essay. The experience gained from dictatorships, the elimination of entire ethnic groups, the discontinuity of organizations, national disasters, emigration, and other forms of derailment from the usual character of natural social and cultural change caused cultures to be embraced as the internal exile of individual communities inhabiting the Central European space. Increasingly, cultures became the guarantors of survival and factors of continuity (cf. Sayer 1998).

In a limited extent, this applied already in the period of disintegration of traditional, feudal oriented political and economic structures of Central Europe – specifically in the dying days of the Habsburg monarchy, but mainly in the period of totalitarian regimes, which usurped this part of the Continent, often facing only feeble resistance of the populations concerned. Cultures were the guarantee of a measure of continuity and identity under these regimes.

Since they faced the common enemy, they formed natural international coalitions. Once it became possible, they established cooperation across the borders. Even in totalitarian times, writers, artists and musicians could avail themselves of the absurdity of a monarchy in its death throes, expressed in the works of the likes of Franz Kafka or Robert Musil.

Inasmuch it was evident that the totalitarian system, threatening thought and identity, is the common enemy, and this system cannot be destroyed by direct political attacks, groups of intellectuals throughout eastern Central Europe rallied together for a clever ideological battle. Since the regimes they fought were ideocratic in R. Aron's concept, i.e. they were built upon an ideology; ideological erosion was a lethal weapon that kept on eroding their legitimacy. It is therefore safe to assume that unlike the economic, political and legal interactions, which decomposed Central Europeanism in the totalitarian era, the cultural and intellectual activities, primarily those carried out by dissidents, strengthened the Central European integrity.

However, even these cultural mechanisms were changed after 1989. Initially there was the assumption that Central European orientation alone is a stepping stone on the journey "back to Europe", but the sad predicament of many intellectual initiatives – such as the Central European University, which initially operated simultaneously in Prague, Budapest and Warsaw – indicated that this Central European orientation was not strong enough. Post-1989 intellectual freedom to communicate with the world in general, and Western Europe and the United States in particular, weakened the mutual solidarity of intellectuals and scientists of the Central European space. Timothy Garton-Ash (1992) sensed trouble long before the collapse of the communist regimes when he wrote, in 1986, that leading Polish, Czech and Hungarian intellectuals more often met in Paris or New York than in Warsaw or Prague, and if they read each other at all, the reading was done in English, French or German. He observed that it was less difficult for him to meet them, than for them to meet one another, adding that it could be a pleasant surprise to know, in these circumstances, just how much common ground there was among them. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the community of Central European intellectuals, indirectly harking back, in totalitarian times, to the strange past world Robert Musil dubbed *Kakania* (*Biggies World – translator's note*) created mutual bonds in thought, although they were open only to a small group of insiders. I believe this shared experience in resistance, and how to defend ourselves, still carries a measure of sociological relevance. It should not be overestimated, but it would be a mistake not to see it.

My last note: It seems that the membership of the Central European countries in the European Union, their chance to win EU grants for research and

other intellectual endeavours, along with the meetings of students and liberal scientists from Central Europe at West European universities – their numbers run into hundreds of thousands – create a new awareness of shared interests and the usefulness of interaction with people equipped with similar experience from not-too-distant past. Therefore, cultural interaction within the Central European space is still an important dimension of Central European coexistence. It need not be completely suppressed by being extended to new horizons. One can imagine a response to the growing communication with all-European or indeed global culture, which would lead not only to rediscovering good provincial cultures but also to discovering their deeper values. This has often happened with the history of Czech culture, when for example the soft and naive attitudes of the Czech avant-garde, modifying homely – often rural – motives to suit generally attractive, cosmopolitan tastes. Art in particular continues to draw inspiration from regional spaces, but rationalist science and technology doubtlessly do not require contexts such as Central Europe. Science and technology aim for universality and not the accentuation of particular spaces, such as Central Europe. These spaces are above all the products of culture.

Is there a Central Europe today, existing as a specific and identifiable macro-region of Europe?

The answer is yes and no, depending on each and every dimension I could consider in my paper. In addition to the answer differing one dimension from another, the level of integration of political, economic and cultural facets of the Central European macro-region was different in the various historical epochs. Unfortunately, the level of common threat played a key role, and common threats called for common defences, including the awareness of similarity and the need for cooperation.

In the Soviet era, long-term threats had more serious implications that united all the satellites. By contrast, Nazism succeeded in poisoning individual Central European national communities against each other. At present, with the relations among individual national communities developing fairly spontaneously, mutual relations are influenced by vying for positions in Europe and the world at large. There is something in the making that I, together with the Chicago School authors, would describe as the symbiotic competition. This involves both cooperation and competition. This situation will probably be a permanent feature of our future coexistence.

I have attempted to sum up my notes, most of which are based on partial analyses and the estimates of an participating observer, who has monitored this space for decades, reading and thinking about it, into a summary availa-

ble at the end of my text. I have worked with three dimensions and five periods that are crucial, from the Czech point of view, for assessing the merits of orientation towards Central Europe. My results show that Central Europe continues to exist as a special, rather loosely structured macro-region of Europe. In my view, this is not a significant orientation, but it is not negligible, as shown by numerous surveys. However, one should realize that the differences between individual geographic components of Europe diminished during the 20th century in terms of economy, technology and, to an extent, also social anthropology. By virtue of this development, Europe as a whole is emerging as a reference framework. The remaining differences (good for them to linger on) are associated with cultures, mentalities, and identities. Luckily, the homogenizing effects of our technical-economic civilization have so far failed to destroy cultural differentiation, and I hope that it will not happen in future, either.

Table 3—Importance of Central European orientations in Central European countries in historical periods

Dimension	Period				
	1867–1918	1918–1939	1939–1945	1945–1989	1989+
Economic	••	•	•	••	••
Political	•••	•	•	••	••
Cultural	••	••	•	••	•

- – low significance
- – medium significance
- – strong significance

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