

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF CENTRAL EUROPE

EDITED BY

ZLATKO ŠABIČ AND PETR DRULÁK

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Zlatko Šabič

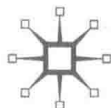
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1

Introduction to 'Central Europe'

Zlatko Šabič and Petr Drulák

The purpose of the book is to revisit the role and place of Central Europe in contemporary regional and international politics. Since the end of the Cold War and up until the end of the 1990s, the almost forgotten concept of Central Europe received enormous attention in the literature. Analyses that have focused on the transition of former Communist states and their rediscovery of their 'Central European identity' were abundant, and examples of such analyses will often be referred to in this volume as well. However, the present-day Central Europe and its neighbourhood are very different from the Central Europe and its neighbourhood that were discussed more than a decade ago. During the last 20 years, the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) enlargement has touched the Balkans and stretched all the way to the Baltic borders of the former Soviet Union. The 'Big Bang' enlargement of the European Union (EU) happened in 2004, and it was soon followed by Romania and Bulgaria gaining their membership as well. For these reasons alone it is important to return to the debate about Central Europe and check the relevance of the notion in light of these changed circumstances. But there is more to it, as some Central European institutions, such as the Visegrad Group (V4), which was pronounced more or less dead as late as 2005 (The Economist 2005), have recently seen a notable revival.

In the world of the Central European academia, scholars of international relations (IR) grew stronger in numbers. Long neglected (if not ignored) by traditional professional organizations, the young generation of Central European scholars has made an effort to develop its own institutional infrastructure, and this infrastructure is currently embodied in the Central and East European International Studies Association (CEEISA). Today, the CEEISA is an established international organization. It holds regular conferences. It has its own globally recognized and acclaimed official journal, which is called the *Journal of International Relations and Development*. In other words, things do happen in the region. However, we are not aware of any book that has revisited Central Europe by taking into account all these developments.

The main motivation of this book is a desire to contribute towards teaching about Central Europe from an IR perspective. In this respect, the book cannot escape from addressing some traditional questions of interest to researchers and students, especially those concerning the definition of Central Europe. While we recognize the difficulties with defining a Central European region – the contributors in this volume have been quite critical of such efforts – we also realize that the region has earned an important place in contemporary history. One cannot study Central Europe without understanding its history. Nevertheless, the focus of this book is on the present and the future. We have decided to collect knowledge about Central Europe and the ‘world outside it’ by asking questions of academic and political relevance. We wanted to know, for example, the answers to the following questions: How is Central Europe recognized by its neighbours, or actors outside the region? Can Central Europe really be a player in global politics? Is there a special role for Central Europe in Europe? These are just some of the questions that will be entertained in the following chapters.

Our approach – methodological agnosticism¹ – is closely connected with the rationale of this book, which is to keep the Central European scholarship in IR open to academia, students, and practitioners from both the region and beyond who are interested in Central Europe. Most of the authors who contribute to this volume are members of the CEEISA and/or teach at regional institutions. They are historians, IR specialists, and economists. The variety of perspectives on Central Europe that they bring with their analyses will help us achieve several goals that we have set for this book: (i) to take stock of, and contribute to, knowledge about Central Europe; (ii) to point at what we believe are the main issues that Central Europe faces in the regional and global political arena today; and (iii) to encourage further research in this field as well as to stimulate teaching at universities where Central Europe is being or may be taught. But before we give the floor to the contributors to this book, some preliminary thoughts about its central topic may be in order.

1.1 About the name

The term ‘Central Europe’ is anything but a stranger to academic literature, be it in natural or social sciences. The phrase has almost 30 million hits on Google, but a quick glance over the hits shows that it is anything but clear what territory can be clearly associated with ‘Central Europe’. In the international politics and IR literature, the confusion about what represents a certain region is significant, but as far as Central Europe is concerned, scholars seem to agree on one thing, namely, that Central Europe does not exist only as a geographic term. It is an area with a long history; it is a group of countries which have been subjected to political, economic, cultural, and social influences through the centuries. But this is the point where the

agreement stops. 'Acknowledging that central Europe exists,' writes Peter Katzenstein, 'there is no agreement where it starts precisely, and where it ends. Is its centre in Berlin, Prague, Vienna, or further east? Are the Baltic states part of central Europe? What about Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria? There are no precise or uncontested answers to these questions' (Katzenstein 1997: 4).

In the past, there have been some theoretical and practical attempts to define Central Europe. Halford J. Mackinder had little doubt about whether Central Europe was a region in its own right. In a book series on 'The Regions of the World', which Mackinder edited, his colleague Joseph Partsch (1915) contributed a book called simply 'Central Europe', and in the view of this book, Central Europe was composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. But with the changes that took place in and between the two world wars, the perception of Central Europe changed somewhat. Thus, Alan Palmer (1970) talked about Central Europe as a 'belt' between Russia and Germany consisting of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Also, in the military language used during the Cold War, the term 'Central Europe' was synonymous with the term 'Central Front'. The latter was generally understood as the area that would be the major battlefield between NATO and the Soviet bloc should the tensions between the East and the West escalate into an armed conflict. Besides East Germany, the 'Central Front' included two other countries that were then considered to be in the Central European 'region': Czechoslovakia and Poland (Mearsheimer 1982; Congressional Budget Office 1977). But more recently, in the EU, 'Central Europe' has acquired yet another meaning, as the EU has launched the programme called 'Central Europe', which promotes cooperation between Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.² The list of definitions could go on indefinitely.

The vast array of representations about what is and what is not Central Europe begs the following question: How come that there is so much of Central Europe in the literature yet there is no consensus about the definition of its territory? To address the ensuing puzzle, we posit that there are two interconnected explanations of both the confusion and the persistence of the term in the literature. The first explanation relates to the geostrategic importance of Central Europe in world affairs; the second involves the pragmatic perception of Central Europe which originates from geostrategic concerns, and which gives Central Europe a particular meaning in a given context and time.

1.2 Geostrategic importance

Some authors try to explain Central Europe as an area that was an eternal theatre of conquests, clashes, and indescribable violence from the era of the