Political borders, economical borders, cultural borders – a dissonance (Problems of Central Europe during the inter-war-period)

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The theme is based on the question „what is Central Europe”. This has been the matter of discussion since the end of 19th century. The first significant wave of these discussions peaked during WWI; the last has begun in 1980s and has not been closed so far. The discussions repeatedly ask the question of integration and disintegration in Central Europe. An exemplar intention of these discussions is to overcome the politicized notion that Central Europe is the area of disintegrated Austria-Hungary which should not be renewed. Another level of the discussion is the economic integration of Central Europe and its reasonability. The most complex level in the discussion is the problem of „cultural Central Europe”, from never ending looking for „common cultural heritage”, specific cultural features of Central Europe, specific models of thinking, common features of education systems, etc, to direct denial of any „cultural Central Europe”.

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The disintegration of Austria-Hungary in 1918, reputedly the main step in the disintegration of Central Europe, is described in historiography by many thesis based on false conditions, or even false myths. Political and economic disintegration of Central European area did not start in 1918 but as soon as in 1867, by Austrian-Hungarian Settlement. In 1870s, both parts went their separate political ways. In the west, modernized and developed political system evolved, based on emerging civic society. In the east, the political system rather declined than evolved (from the Viennese point of view, it was perceived as Oriental) and was based on estates, with civic society suppressed heavily.

Liberalization and modernization of Cisleithanian political system accelerated significantly in the second half of 1890s. Cisleithania was formed by a federation of politically strong “Lands”, the system was characterised as “republics within a monarchy”. The modernization of political system allowed for the solution of important conflicts on the “Lands” level, by true political methods. The constitution developed also on the level of central authorities; the army and imperial court remaining a problem (as power centres with limited political control). The turn came with the beginning of the war in 1914, when after a coup d’etat the whole of Cisleithania was governed by military dictatorship. Liberal democratic parts of society perceived the army headquarters as criminal organization. In fact, the dictatorship started the general disintegration.

Soon after 1867, Transleithania became the leading force of political disintegration. The system of state political extreme centralisation provoked many conflicts, which were solved by violence, including state terror. Parliamentarism was only fictional and the political system was based on estates. Attempts to modernize were weak and inefficient. At the same time, ongoing trials to strengthen the Transleithanian government led to weakening of remnant competences of common Austro-Hungarian authorities. E.g., the army was split to three particular parts, significantly deteriorating its force. As Transleithinan political system was

devolving gradually for a long time, the changes after 1914 were not so prominent. However, it was calm before a storm, which came when the war ended. Cisleithania underwent quiet political implosion; on the other hand, the dissolution of Transleithia resulted in open armed conflicts, ended only by a sort of armistice by autumn 1919. The Trianon peace treaty was signed not only to account for the share of Transleithia in the “Great war” but also for the subsequent internal wars and wars between new Hungary and its neighbours. It was a dissintegration by war.

From the economic point of view, Austria-Hungary formed one economical area, nothing more. Indeed, the economic area of Austro-Hungary was not united. On one side, there was liberal economical policy of Austrian government, on the other side, anti-liberal economical policy of Hungarian government. Two different and incompatible economical systems formed and soon voices were heard demanding functioning custom border between both systems. Such a border was almost established around 1900, the process was stopped only by direct imperial order – a non-constitutional measure. By 1907 the demand for custom border between Austria and Hungary was back in the game.

In Cisleithania, the cultural differentiation had almost purely political-cultural dimension. The politics of “nationalities” in Cisleithania was developed on ethnic basis. Any parameters that would speak for cultural concord or similarity between two or more nationalities were suppressed or denied. In Cisleithania, apparent cultural difference as the elementary dimension of overall cultural differences resulted from the differences in education. The education level was highest in multiethic areas. These were also highly industrialised. This contrast led to conflicts; on the other hand it led to getting close, as ethnicities exhausted by conflicts and sharing the same area were liable to peaceful co-operation. The trends of cultural closeness and common cultural area of Cisleithania were coming from cities along the main axis of Cisleithania and were fuelled by growing mobility of people.

In Transleithia, the cultural differences had more tangled roots: surviving estate society and deep differences between regions – Transleithia contained many regional closed communities with particular history and frozen in time due to minimal mobility of their inhabitants. Regional difference was influenced also by religious differences. This cultural difference should have been politically covered (not solved) by the ideology of single Hungarian nation. Syntheses between small regions on ethnical basis should have been prevented. The difference as well as cultural backwardness of the low levels of society, including their low literacy, suited Transleithanian top politicians. The difference between Cisleithania and Transleithia was most significant on the cultural level. Trends to overcome the consequences and mechanisms of cultural backwardness arose slightly in Budapest and Bratislava, as well as within the narrow strip along the western (e.g. Cisleithanian) border. These trends were developed mainly by exiled activists, living either in Vienna or other Cisleithanian cities or even in America.

The dissolution of Austria-Hungary in 1918 was very soon perceived and analysed as disadvantage by some businessmen and industrialists. This led to the formation of many economic integration projects. Some of them included following thesis: economically

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3 These relatively less educated parts of individual ethnicities were concentrated in small towns and in the country or remote areas and tried to dominate politically the other ethnicity in the particular region (e.g. “Land”). This could lead to neither permanent nor positive solution.

4 Along Kaiser-Ferdinand-Nordbahn and Südbahn, from Trieste, to Graz, Vienna, Brno, Ostrava, Kraków, Lwów.

5 Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, two branches of Protestants (Lutheranian, Calvinist), Jewish.
integrated Central Europe is essential for later political integration of “new Central Europe”. Such integration would be also essential for the peace in all Europe.\textsuperscript{6} Later, it became clear that purely economical integration is not enough. The solution should include the renewal of common cultural area, development of common culture based solely on the consciousness of individuals. The solutions for Central Europe and its integration should be looked for and formed in this way. United Central Europe could be the starting point for the union of all Europe.

It is necessary to point out the general level of possible conflicts. In Europe, mainly in Central Europe and neighbouring areas, the contrast and conflict between “civic state” and “national state” (as the ethnical profiled state) is often present. During the French revolution, the citizen was state sovereign for some time. The citizen is the state sovereign anywhere where the state is based on the politic nation principle. Even though the term is not very clear, political nation that is based on civic principle, results not in national state but in civic state. Even nowadays, Europe is undermined by the problem that there are too many hard or soft nationalists and too few citizens. This is problem not only in France but more and more also in Central Europe.

The consequences are various: e.g. the repeating nationalist effort to control both economy and culture by the state. This has played major role in Central and West Europe since the half of the 19th century. Natural trends in economy as well as culture fought against these efforts, leading to formation of wider economic and cultural areas.

The consequences gave birth to conflict line: European culture versus national culture. The state policy in particular European countries, including educational policy, developed the notion of ethnic- or language-based “national culture”. Older concept of common European culture was suppressed. European culture was permitted only in the sense of “national cultures” added together. “National culture” should have been developed mainly to increase the differences and to put distance between individual “national cultures”. This concept was supported by conservative-religious interests.

However, new and new generations of important European thinkers pointed out the common roots of European cultures (coming from ancient Rome) and common features of actual European culture.\textsuperscript{7} Culture is not and should not be unified throughout Europe; it is a community, unity in variance. The profile or importance of regional differences that could be listed as “national culture” has remained unresolved.\textsuperscript{8} Experience shows that neighbouring “national cultures” are usually almost identical, i.e. it is not possible to find a borderline between “national cultures”. Furthermore, the main obstacles on the way to mutual communication between the bearers of “national cultures” are the persisting conservative-religious features within the culture.

At the moments of huge social crises, mainly in the end of both world wars and following years, the concepts of “national culture” were abused successfully for the purposes of political extremism.

The inner conflict was very specific within German-speaking cultural area which had strong impact on mentalities all over Central Europe. Politicized Bismarck and post-Bismarck


\textsuperscript{7} Common European culture (namely the common German and French culture by Victor Hugo, Heinrich Heine, etc) was accentuated since the first half of the 19th century as counterbalance against ideas calling for national states and national cultures. Reappearing in programmes and ideas of resistance movements during WW II and among European exiles in America, it came back in West Europe at the end of 1960s and in 1970s during the first crisis of West European economic integration.

\textsuperscript{8} The differences and specific conditions appear within large or small regions, not within “national states”.
(north German) thinking repeated the idea that „Kultur kommt vom Westen“ to Poland as well as other countries and that the flow goes in one direction only. This led to defensive mechanisms and seclusion on the side of ethnicities suppressed by “German culture”. Austrian area and mainly its capital either mocked such thinking or were not able to understand it. Here, the idea that „Kultur kommt vom Süden“ has been obvious for centuries. (To Austria, Moravia, Hungary, Slovakia, etc.. This area communicated with the South, i.e. Mediterranean, in both directions).\(^9\)

On the contrary, the most obvious and the most important real supraregional cultural synthesis (not sterile “multicultural” living “side to side”) is characteristic for the axis going from the north to south through Central Europe. In the 19\(^{th}\) century and until the beginning of WW II, the most intercultural centers were Gdańsk, Łódź, Lwow, Ostrava, Brno, Vienna, Trieste (and later Thessaloniki).

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In West and Central Europe, the results of WW I accelerated the trend of state policy to control the economics and culture.\(^10\) This was significant in successor states of Austria-Hungary that refused any “return”. The strict “state interest” demanded political distance from other successor states as well as impenetrable economical borders, which led to positive consequences in the short term and negative impact in the long term. Impenetrable cultural borders were tried but they proved soon impossible to maintain.

In the first wave of discussion on Central Europe, the demand to constitute cultural geography as new branch of science was presented by Vienna University and independent Institut für Kulturforschung in Vienna. Viennese intellectual core and its Central European co-workers formed thinking pool that produced concepts for united Central Europe from the point of view of economy, politics, international security and culture.

The Central Europe was seen as sharing common cultural heritage. These concepts did not look in the past, they were not based on sentimental reminiscence of fallen empire, nor romantic call for „lost values“. They were based on knowledge of cultural dynamics of large cities, connected with each other, forming a belt from Trieste to Lwów and Łódź, and able to change the cultural development in smaller towns (even though with some delay). Out of this cultural community, the new feeling of communion should grow that would be essential for functional economic and political union. The notion of identity should deepen the Central Europeanism feeling of the people, as well as their Europeanism, and stand against the growing nationalism.

These concepts warned that cultural and intellectual boundaries in Central Europe do not coincide with political borders. The existence of cultural and spiritual borders supports the tension between contra-traditionalists who prepare certain “cultural and spiritual Central European union” and traditionalists who fight for nationalism, political or religious control of culture.

On this occasion, at least, some characteristics: what was the situation 20 years later? We can see the concept by Milan Hodža, intellectual and politician\(^11\) and the concept by Victor Bauer, important Czechoslovak businessman, patron of culture, intellectual, and cultural researcher. Both of them took part in the discussions on Central Europe in Vienna during the WWI and both presented their ripe ideas in 1930s (Hodža even at the beginning of 1940s).

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\(^9\) German historiography used to stress the facts of the formation of nations and their states, and this included the interpretation of culture; in 1930s it connected the national state with the race and area. These concepts were not abandoned sooner than in 1960s.

\(^10\) The arguments of victorious, defeated and neutral states differed from each other, of course.

\(^11\) 1878-1944. Professor of history at Comenius University in Bratislava, in 1930s minister and prime minister (1935-1938) of Czechoslovak government.
On general level, both of them contributed to another problem of European cultural development, namely East-West cultural dualism in evolution of European culture, which was perceived by both of them as cultural-geographical concept.

In March 1936, Hodža presented – beside his more known Danubian Plan\(^{12}\) – his innovated draft of Central Europe\(^{13}\) as cultural-political and geopolitical unity.\(^{14}\) Paradoxically, he persisted to base his geopolitical deductions on cultural-political grounds. Similarly, he perceived the connections between economy and its cultural-political background.

Hodža draw the main European dividing line through the area where the sphere of Roman-Western culture meets the Orthodox culture. Literally, he wrote of “demarcation line” that is visible on all levels from the lowest material culture to high romanticism and mysticism. Elsewhere, he speaks of demarcation line between “two large civilization streams.”

Cultural phenomena also formed the basis for his “second European corridor”. He defined it as going from the Baltic Sea along Wisła, Morava and Váh, Danube, South Morava (Serbian), and Vardar rivers to Thessaloniki in the south. He saw this area as an axis, on which the streams of cultural values concentrated for several centuries. This corridor was similar to the stabilised crucial West European corridor that existed along the Rhine and Rhône rivers.

In Central Europe, he claimed that the corridor did not reach its final form and that a new civilization area was growing along. Even though Hodža saw older roots, the trend started to grow significantly only after 1918. This corridor was the axis of “new Central Europe” as its “civilization area”. New Central Europe could not be based on economical reasons only, although that was the most frequent argument, that would be unilateral, Hodža claimed. The future economical (maybe later political) Central Europe could be defined only by “cultural spiritual and moral prerequisites, forming along this corridor”. Hodža stressed the necessity to stimulate proper intellectual forces in the area because they could strengthen the corridor and boost its functionality.

Hodža warned that “new Central Europe” had to be formed on cultural, spiritual, and moral basis, mainly because of self-preservation. Otherwise, it would get stuck between the rock of German world (i.e. Nazist) and the hard place of Russian world (i.e. Communist). Central Europe would yield to one of them, first intellectually and culturally, later economically, and in the end politically. The second possibility was the dissection of Central Europe by these worlds. Hodža did not forget to accentuate that “the Orient begins at Russian borders”.\(^{15}\) Central Europe has to play an active role as barrier against the extreme “collectivism that kills the individual and thus also the economical and cultural development”.\(^{16}\)

Hodža refused any attempts to start an integration process in all Europe. From details upwards – that was the only manageable way: first regional bases, then integrated regional areas and finally united Europe. Regional union of Central Europe was presented by Hodža as one of the “most acute problems of all European politics”.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{13}\) On Hodža’s concepts during the 1920s to 1940s see: GONĚC, Vladimír: Milan Hodža before „Milan Hodža“


\(^{15}\) I.e., western borders of the Soviet Union between the world wars.

\(^{16}\) HODŽA, Milan: Kulturní..., p. 434.

\(^{17}\) HODŽA, Milan: Kulturní..., p. 435.
Hodža’s concept has to be perceived as a concept of the history of civilisation and culture, respectively real civilisation and culture in real particular area, which is something more complex and more founded on multiple arguments than unilateral geopolitical views.\(^{18}\)

Victor Bauer\(^{19}\) supported Viennese Institut für Kulturforschung and was an active member himself. For 15 years he had been working on his book “Central Europe as a living organism”.\(^{20}\)

He saw Central Europe not as a piece of geography but as a cultural process on the border between the West and the East. This process was running mostly in large cities – Vienna, Gdaňsk, Łódź, Breslau/Wroclaw, Ostrava, Brno, Graz, Trieste. These are centres of both economical and cultural growth and innovation. They are the foundations for the common town culture in the whole area between Stettin, Venice, Kaliningrad/Königsberg, and Constantinople. Not only society (Gesellschaft), but real cultural community (Gemeinschaft) was formed.\(^{21}\) In large cities, the long-term inter-culturalism process is running, getting its inputs from mixed tribal and cultural background. The western and eastern elements not only meet each other, both join and form new qualities, sending new impulses both to East and West. These cities boast large share of Oriental people. The Jews were fleeing Western Europe in the Middle Ages, and the Eastern Europe later, forming about 10 % of population in these cities (in Łódź even 27 %). Furthermore, there were other oriental nations, e.g. Armenians (most numerous in Vienna and Lwow). These intercultural people should form Central European economic community and then enter the European economic community. Full integration of Central Europe would end by supranational federation and that process would need some effort.

This could not be reached by some theoretical formal legal constructions. The formation of cultural community have to be analyzed, the pressures for economical union have to be analyzed as well and based on that, necessary tools for economical union of Central Europe should be defined. Only in the end, it would be possible and essential to choose suitable political system, compatible with both cultural and economical union.

Hodža and Bauer were not isolated thinkers; we can mention two other Prague scientists. Jaroslav Bidlo,\(^{22}\) at his time one of the few experts on European history in Czechoslovakia, professor of Charles University, defined the concept of European cultural dualism from the point of view in dimensions of purely historical science.\(^{23}\) This dualism had a history of more than 1500 years, changed and shifted towards cultural “unity in variety”.

This cultural dualism in Europe was the consequence of the division of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century, when Constantinople was turned to the second centre of the empire. The decline of Ancient Rome gave rise to two cultures – Roman-Western and Greek-Eastern. The eastern area lacked such movements as karolingian or otthonian renaissance in the Early Middle Ages and reformation and contra-reformation were in West and Central Europe. Contra-reformation was also a transformation as Roman Catholics left the medieval version of


\(^{19}\) 1874-1939.


\(^{21}\) Similarly, these were developed by the Austrian sociologist Tönnies. See: TÖNNIES, Ferdinand: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie. Leipzig: Buske, 1935 (8th enlarged edition).

\(^{22}\) 1868-1937.

their religion which was the original western form of Christianity. Uniatism is west-oriented contra-reformation of the Orthodox Church in its Western regions.

Greek-Orthodox cultural area tried with all might to conserve the eastern Christian culture on the stage it reached in the 3rd century. All streams and influences that endangered the purity of this culture should have been destroyed systematically. This led to dissolution and disintegration. Firstly, monophysite forms of Christianity split apart, the second phase was represented by changes leading to the formation of Islam culture and religion. After the defeat of Constantinople in 1204, the influence of west European Culture increased in the area, causing new splittings and shifts as some cultures opted for the west culture and some for Islam.

In the end, in the 19th century, the influence of the West prevailed on Greeks, Romanians, Serbs, and Bulgarians and this area moved to the West. On the other hand, Russia had only “second-hand” Greek-Orthodox culture and was not its identical part. There, the resistance of the church and governing theocracy against the west culture won. Russia has nothing in common with Europe, due to its history, development and cultural character and its ideas differ significantly, as well.

Communism is a mere anti-European contra-revolution, Bidlo hinted; Hodža and Coudenhove-Kalergi admitted. The area of former Greek-Eastern culture disappeared: its southern part moved to the west, northern part left Europe for good. There is no East Europe any more.

Gerhard Gesemann, professor of German University in Prague in 1930s, was cultural historian and worked on concepts of “the culture coming from the south”, warned against “the vulgar philosophy of space” developed by [north-]German historiography. Gesemann in accordance with Hodža developed the idea that “East Europe and its culture used to be here but the course of history caused it to fade away.” Russia lies eastwards from Constantinople, it took over some aspect of Greek spiritual culture and integrated them with state system of Mongolian origin. Mongolia and Russia are only two subsequent phases. The Soviet Union (with borders as of between world wars) is Eurasian area, it is unity in geographic, cultural, anthropological and sociological sense.

Gesemann pointed out 15-years-old ideas of cultural geography as presented by Albrecht Penck. Gesemman’s concept of “Europe between Germany and Russia” coincided with Masaryk’s thoughts; respectively he moved Masaryk’s geopolitical and pacifist ideas to the dimension of cultural history.

Hodža, Bauer, Bidlo, and Gesemann (later, as well as Oskar Halecki from Warsaw) agreed on the main thesis: The eastern border of Poland and Rumania (as of inter-war period) are “real borders”, “principal borders in cultural sense”. They claimed that there are not any obvious cultural boundaries within Europe and the will to form such borders is ill-meaning and could damage Europe.

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The weaknesses of the concept of “national culture” and discussions on common European culture repeatedly show the variance in cultural streams in the course of history and thus the “fluidity” of cultural areas or cultural borders. This is valid both for large (continental,

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24 In the case of the Soviet Union, it is the full identity of political, economical and cultural borders. The area is absolutely consistent and united.
27 There were also other thinkers, the “Eurasians”. George Vernadsky lived in exile in Prague for five years and developed his historiographic conception of Eurasianism. Nicolai Trubetzkoy lived in Vienna between the wars and developed there his ideas on Persian and Central Asian roots of Russian written, pictorial and musical folk culture.
subcontinental) cultural areas and regional cultural areas. Unity in variance has been typical for Central Europe for almost 300 years.

Between the wars, European cultural community was re-evaluated and rediscovered. Common European culture itself was identified. At the same time, theories on the uniqueness of national cultures or dominance of particular national cultures were developed and spread; usually there was direct relation to particular political interests, including aggression. These theories formed the foundations of political ideologies and goals of Nazism and Italian fascism.  

However, there were also opposite cases. At that time, Central European culture was revived by several elements, including growing Czechoslovak Polish cultural co-operation, connection and mixing. In 1930s, its intensity grew in spite of the fact that the political relation between the two countries was moving from extreme dislike to open enmity. The cultural triangle Vienna-Brno-Bratislava survived successfully also between wars.

Subsequently, during the WWII, the experience of transformation and acceptance of cultural values became something real and essential for exiles from Europe. To name a less known but particular example, national ballets in Argentina and Brazil were founded by Czechoslovak choreographer Ivo Psota from Brno.

We should not forget the long-term interest in Japanese culture we have in West and Central Europe. The admiration of and inspiration by Japanese culture peaked in 1890s and 1900s, followed by another wave at the beginning of 1960s, another was caused by World exhibition EXPO 1970 in Osaka lasted for several years.

The ways people think and mentalities as a part of the highest level of spiritual culture were also the core of the projects and strategies of Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi, one of the most prominent thinkers of united Europe, son of Japanese mother and Austrian father.

28 Francistic ideology also claimed the dominance of Spanish culture, demanding that „decaying and second-rate European culture“ should not be let in Spain. After Franco’s death, this led to cultural conflict between „Europeism“ and „Africanism“.

29 Including novel areas as film-making.

30 Close communication with Vienna was cultural support for many cultural centres in Germany, mainly Dresden and Breslau.

31 E.g. in France, „l’art nouveau“, music of Claude Debussy, etc.

32 Author of Pan-Europe manifesto (1923), during the Inter-War-Period the general secretary of Pan-Europe Union, after WWII general secretary of European Parliamentary Union, in 1960s head of European Movement. His last work is the enlarged edition of „Europa erwacht!“ (1972).

This idea was developed by Jean Monnet who warned that mere economical integration of Europe would be a short-lived project. It has to be based on Europe belonging together and the idea has to be shared by politicians and citizens. The question is important even now, with economical crisis in Europe and institutional crisis within the European Union.