“Born out of Crisis, Buried by Catastrophe”

Central Europe as a Project Doomed to Failure

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Abstract: In her paper, the author examines images of Central Europe created in various popular genres (campus novels, quasi-guidebooks, films, essays) as well as interpretations of the Central European myth from countries of the region. The aim is to reflect on two main Central European narratives. One is a vision of retrospective utopia of lost harmonious coexistence of cultures, religions and nations. The other – an image of the “misery of small Central European states”, of a backward region, immersed in never-ending ethnic conflicts. The author seeks to address the question of how these narratives influence the interpretation of the systemic transition process and of contemporary problems that the region is facing.

Keywords: Central Europe; transition; stupidity; nationalism; neoliberalism

> A city infinitely rich in this, and no less lacking in that, Slaka is […] the historic capital and quite the largest metropolis of that small dark nation of plain and marsh, mountain and factory known in all the history books as the bloody battlefield […] of central eastern Europe. Located by an at once kind and cruel geography at the confluence of many trade routes […] it is a land that has frequently flourished […], but has yet more frequently been pummelled, fought over, raped, pillaged, conquered and oppressed by the endless invaders […]. This is a country that has been now big, now small, now virtually non-existent. […] so confused is its past that the country could now be in a place quite different from that in which it started. And so its culture is a melting pot, its language a *pot-pourri*, its people a salad (Bradbury, 1983/2012, pp. 1–2).

In the 1980s, when Western intellectuals debated over the “tragedy of Central Europe”, Malcolm Bradbury, author of popular novels that paint a satirical portrait of the world of academia, described in his *Rates of Exchange* Slaka, the capital city of an unspecified communist country visited with a series of lectures by the protagonist Doctor Petworth, who then becomes embroiled in a string of absurd adventures. While many authors and thinkers from both sides of the Iron Curtain were quite taken by the retrospective utopia of Central Europe as a region of harmonious co-existence of a multicultural, multireligious and multinational community, Bradbury jibed at these lofty narratives, underpinned by martyrdom, unintelligible from the perspective of a Western observer, and ruled by a murky logic.

Bradbury was neither the only nor the first author who decided to locate a fictional land governed by its own irrational laws in Central / Central Eastern Europe. According to the words of the French literary scholar Xavier Galmiche, already in the Enlightenment, Central Europe, or Central Eastern Europe, began to play the role of New Abdera, that is a space used “to illustrate the divergence from the cultural norm” (Galmiche,

2013, p. 146). The genre of entertaining and precautionary "tales of miserable lands", developing both in Western Europe and in the region itself, gained great following in the second half of the twentieth century, and their prototype might have been the fictional Syldavia, travelled by Tintin, the protagonist of popular comic books, before the outbreak of World War II. I would like to make these "amusing tales" the point of departure for reflections on the fates of various projects of Central Europe and on the condition of its inhabitants, as the conclusions to be drawn from humorous and satirical narratives are usually very sad.

"Typical Products of the New Spirit of Postmarxist Entrepreneurial Capitalism"

Popular culture fed on the images of Central Europe as a backward, bizarre region characterized by archaic customs, outdated social relations, illogical behaviour of its inhabitants. The post-Yalta division of the continent and the isolation of its eastern part fostered the strangest of fantasies about the "kidnapped part of Europe", and the political regimes that ruled the countries of this region, with their appetite for total control, facade and spectacular rituals, proclivity for corruption and bureaucracy, provided fodder for the imagination of filmmakers, authors of novels and comics, and were the topic of various, not only satirical, speculations. Central and Eastern Europe was often the location of imaginary states and cities, it became the endless source of characters the likes of Count Dracula or the Moldavian prince Michael, who brought extra chaos into what was already a complicated life of the heroes of *Dynasty*. The otherness of Central Eastern Europe was seen either through a satirical lens, as in *Rates of Exchange*, in which the confrontation of a Western man with the communist regime was the catalyst of absurd and comical situations, or in a demonic convention, as part of the "empire of evil", in numerous action and spy stories.

Against expectations, this convention did not exhaust itself after the fall of the Iron Curtain. To the contrary: the process of transformation, the profound social change, the specific "turbo-capitalism" became a fetching subject, both to the authors from this region[1] and to the Western pop culture. In one of the novels of Jonathan Franzen, popular writer and author of best-selling *Freedom*, the protagonist, who like Doctor Petworth is an academic teacher, arrives in Vilnius of the 1990s, which turns out to be a devastated city of mounting absurdities, unbelievable corruption and a hub for human trafficking.

1 The frenetic and oneiric images of the economic transformation in Central Eastern European countries, underpinned by black humour, can also be found in the Czech novel *City, Sister, Silver* by Jáchym Topol (Topol, 2000) and in the short stories by Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan (*Anthem of Democratic Youth*, Zhadan, 2006).

> Lithuania.com was officially launched on 5 November. A high-res banner – DEMOCRACY PAYS HANDSOME DIVIDENDS – unfurled to the accompaniment of sixteen joyful bars of the "Dance of the Coachmen and Grooms" in *Petrushka*. Side by side, in a rich blue graphical space below the banner, were a black-and-white *Before* picture ("Socialist Vilnius") of shell-scarred facades and shattered lindens on the Gedimino Prospektas and a luscious colour *After* photograph ("Free-Market Vilnius") of a honey-lit harborside development of boutiques and bistros. (The development was actually in Denmark.) […] All in all, he found Vilnius a lovely world of braised beef and cabbage and potato pancakes, of beer and vodka and tobacco, of comradeship, subversive enterprise, and pussy (Franzen, 2001, pp. 564, 569).

A somewhat similar vision of the postcommunist reality is revealed in *Thinks…*, one of the recent novels by David Lodge, another popular author of the academic novel genre. It features an account of a visit that the protagonist, an English professor of neurolinguistics, pays in Prague.

> My publisher, Miloš Palacký […] turned out to be a typical product of the new spirit of post-marxist entrepreneurial capitalism, a genial but wily character who had conjured up all this publicity without laying out a single *koruna* himself apart from picking up the bill for lunch one day (cauliflower soup with dumplings, roast wild boar with dumplings, fruit dumplings with dumplings)… (Lodge, 2002, p. 218)

Besides the traditional jokes about cuisine and cunning beneficiaries of the hasty economic transformation, in Lodge's book there also appears the character of Ludmila Lisk, an assistant at the Faculty of Psychology, who looks after the lecturer during his visit and who is willing to do anything in return for an invitation to a prestigious conference organized by him in Great Britain. She confirms the stereotypical image of Central Eastern Europe as a backwards region, whose female inhabitants can offer only sexual services (seeing as they have little to offer intellectually):

> […] when she was getting dressed to go home she asked me if she could give a paper because then she could apply to the British Council for a travel grant… I said the programme was already full (a lie) but she could do a poster if she liked… I could hardly say less having just fucked her… but the Council won't think a poster is worth a travel grant… I trust… (Lodge, 2002, p. 221)[2]

Where the authors of academic novels at least try to uphold some semblance of balance when it comes to administering mockery against the people of the "West" and of "Central Europe", the authors of the quasi-guide *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* from 2004 take complete liberty in exploiting just one type of comicality, shown by the cover, featuring a photograph of an older man raising a toast, whose smile is to be an illustration of the eponymous diagnosis.[3] Xavier Galmiche offers the following description of the sources of the usually unrefined humour characteristic of these types of narratives:

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2 It is interesting that this subject returns with such frequency precisely in the academic genre novels, and the characters confronted with the Central European reality are usually representatives of academia (Lodge himself visited Central Europe on a number of occasions in the 1980s).

3 Cf. website promoting this publication http://www.molvania.com/molvania/, accessed 4.12.2016.

> In a nutshell, the success of this rather heavy-handed comicality is on the one hand – from the sociohistorical perspective – based on the exploitation of the civilizational shift felt by the observers who cannot believe the spectacle of identity claims (national and memory-related) of these countries from their establishment to the aggravation resulting from the disappearance of the yoke of the USSR. In an abstract sense, this is about "those from the West", citizens of the central culture, looking at the dreadful reality of peripheral regions, with a mix of compassion and mockery (in other words: with a colonial gaze). […] the Molvanian mental construction […] is based on a network of complex, devaluing conceptions. (Galmiche, 2013, p. 138)

In the descriptions of Slaka or Molvania, or of Vilnius or Prague undergoing transformation, we can find traces of auto-irony in between the lines, indicating that the object of satire are not (or at least: not only) "the miserable countries", but rather the lack of knowledge and stereotypes held by the "average person" in the West and his or her colonial attitude toward the inhabitants of this region. As in other similar humorous representations, this manoeuvre is nevertheless marked with ambiguity because it makes it possible to smuggle in jokes about the cultural differences of peripheral regions disguised as quips about the ignorance of Western tourists. At the same time, it allows for the deflection of accusations about the openly sexist nature of certain passages in the prose of Lodge or Franzen: it is not about sexism, it is about branding the sexism imbued in the Western look at the "other Europe". And if a joke or two about "pussy" can be smuggled in while admonishing sexism, all the better.

Longing for Odczapów

Yet placing fictional lands in Central Europe and inventing alternative versions of history for them is not only practiced by Western authors, and these musings don't always boil down to painting portrayals of miserable, albeit amusing, lands. This is best illustrated with the example of one of the most spectacular invented cities, Odczapów, through which readers are guided by Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz and Andrzej St. Rodys in their *Przewodnik dla turystów mentalnych* [A Travel Guide for Mental Tourists] (Dunin-Wąsowicz & Rodys, 1999). The travel guide to Odczapów[4] fits into the tradition of persiflage, mystifications and literary games, deeply rooted in the cultures of Central Europe. Odczapów is a city patched together from Central European myths and nostalgic narratives, from everything that we could consider Central European folk kitsch, and that at the same time becomes the essence of Central Europe. Tracing inspirations that the authors of *Przewodnik* may have used, it is worth mentioning a small book with a cult following in some circles. *Wstęp do imagineskopii* [An Introduction to Imagino-scopy] by Śledź Otrembus Podgrobelski is, among other things, a fictional scientific bi-

4 The name Odczapów derives from the Polish phrase *od czapy*, meaning "random, beside the point".

ography of "the founder of the Imperial and Royal Institute for Increasing Imagination in Vienna", Jeremiasz Apolon Hytz, who

> worked as a pharmacist in the small town of Podhajce in Podole, at that time within the borders of Galicia. Self-taught in the domain of humanities, he had a keen interest in philosophy […]. At first, he published his dissertations in German in the Munich-based journal *Die Halbstunde der Philosophie*. He also exchanged correspondence with many outstanding minds of his time, such as Spencer and Wiese. He actively participated in numerous conventions of the Imperial and Royal Philosophical Society in Vienna. (Śledź Otrębus Podgrobelski, 1992, pp. 22–23)

Even though the location is not identified as Central Europe, one can make out clearly enough the play with the imagery of Galicia and the Habsburg Monarchy, along with its network of peripheral scientific institutions of grandiose ambitions, uncountable number of provincial printing houses that published advertising fliers, esoteric brochures and scientific works that were not recognized anywhere, with the inextricable ethnic, national and religious entanglement and, finally, with an army of cursed third-rate artists, visionaries and unappreciated inventors. Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz draws freely from this mythology also in his short story *Mitteleuropa*, originally published in *Lampa*, at the time still an artzin, and later reprinted in the travel guide to Odczapów.[5]

> Jakub Zumbeispiel is about 40 years old. […] He lives in a corner tenement house, somewhere in Central Europe. […]. He lives off the income that a molasses factory inherited from his grandmother should be bringing. The molasses is made from Bulgarian watermelons. The factory is managed by Jakub's closest friend, Hersz Glogower, a black-haired man of Mosaic persuasion. […] They often talk about Freud. (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 1999, p. 47)

Odczapów occupies a special place on the map of fictional Central European lands, because it has been created by authors originating from the region. Their travel guide is not only a simple continuation of the local Abderian traditions (of which Galmiche writes that they are associated with the different Central European *Kocourkovs* [Noodledoms]), but also seems to be the opposite of Slaka or Molvania. As Paweł Gołoburda wrote, "this nostalgic and mocking fantasy, devoid of the fundamental antinomies that make life in Molvania so difficult, represents a less typical humour that incorporates a creative breadth of free imagination with a poetic precision of distant associations" (Gołoburda, 2011, p. 29).

Thus, the travel guide to Odczapów does not offer any ironic commentaries about the absurdities of life in (post)communist countries (although there is no shortage of nostalgia for regional socialist utopias which the Central European discourse quite ef-

5 We should see Odczapów in the context of literary games, of which Dunin-Wąsowicz is quite keen: in his *Widmowa Biblioteka* [Phantom Library] he made a list of books existing only in the novels of other writers, in *Warszawa Fantastyczna* [Fantastic Warsaw] he described alternative visions of the capital as painted in Polish prose. In his enthusiasm for this kind of games he is similar not only to Śledź Otrembus, whom, along with Paweł Gołoburda, he brought out of oblivion on the pages of *Lampa* (cf. Gołoburda, 2008), but also to Malcolm Bradbury. Besides the novel about a fictional Central European country, Bradbury also authored a fictional biography of Henry Mensonge, a representative of the deconstruction current in the humanities, who deconstructed his own self (Bradbury, 1987).

fectively effaced from its imaginary). What comes forth is the disinterested pleasure of creating an entire microcosm, with the Oecumenical Institute of Space Research, the Workers' University, Café Little Affair and the line 9 bus that connects the Freight Station with streets bearing names such as Ku Drzazdze (Sliver Way), Hersz Glogower, Lauren Bacall, Revolutionary Act, Turkish Delight and High Heels. Odczapów is also, to a certain degree, a utopian space, in which the myth of oecumenical cohabitation of nations, cultures and religions, rooted in all kinds of Central European narratives, is realized. The "nostalgic and mocking" convention – references to the Habsburgian imagery, the poetics of absurdity and, finally, the belief that Central Europe, as if an enormous entertainment park or a circus tent, is a space where various norms and laws are suspended and people can change their identities as in a kaleidoscope – is not typical only of the authors from this region. They have also left their mark on the works of many Western artists, who cultivate the "myth of Mitteleuropa" in their own, often fickle, way. One of the recent examples of a play on the Central European mythology is Wes Anderson's film *Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014), and references to it can also be found in the "Vienna episode" of John Irving's novel *The Hotel New Hampshire* (Irving, 1981).[6]

The call to make your own Central Europe, contained in the travel guide to Odczapów, tempts us to develop our tale in the direction of different do-it-yourself practices characteristic of this region, such as hand-made production and recycling, of material objects as well as ideas and texts of culture. This could be a tale of a region where weakness, shortcomings and dilettantism have been turned into virtues, where what is used, "second-hand" acquires a new lustre, revived by fresh meanings and content. Such narratives – finding value in what is weak and fragile, showing the creative potential of those functioning on the peripheries, far from the mainstream culture, and exposing spontaneous, grassroots, ephemeral and unprofessional acts that transform the space of Central European cities, towns and villages – are fortunately an increasingly frequent occurrence.[7] For this reason, we can allow ourselves – or, better said, we have the unpleasant duty – to take a closer look at the less palatable side of "amusing tales of Central Europe".

6 Of interest is the topos, shared by both authors, of a somewhat dilapidated hotel, which becomes a metaphor for the fate of the entire region, whose days of glory are long gone, but which still shows traces of old grandeur, and is a meeting point of all kinds of castaways of various provenance and professions.

7 Two of the most important publications are Tomasz Rakowski's study *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy* [Hunters, Gatherers, Practitioners of Powerlessness] (Rakowski, 2009) and the collective volume *Niewidzialne miasto* [Invisible City] (Krajewski, 2012).

We Were Stupid – We Still Are

Seeking the sources of Central Europe's otherness, Xavier Galmiche noted:

> The concepts of the Other, which unfold in the variations of the topos of Neo-Abderes, […] also correspond to the image of the Self: this model, whose components are purely cultural representations, invites the discovery in a comic mode of the threshold from which the existence of the Other (seen as the Other because of his or her utter stupidity) becomes possible in the social sphere. (Galmiche, 2013, p. 141)

Within this context, Central Europe may become a "bearable" neighbour of the West only once its otherness is recognized in the categories of stupidity, inferiority, ridiculousness. We would like to blame these labels on the colonial perspective, which is inherently inscribed in the "tales of miserable countries". Yet these narratives bring plenty of images which cannot be boiled down to merely a "(post) colonial fantasy": even though described in a satirical convention, often in ways transgressing the boundaries of good taste, problems such as poverty, discrimination of women, corruption, ruthless capitalism or xenophobia are indeed a part of the Central European reality. Even Dunin-Wąsowicz's vision, drawing from the idyllic images of Habsburgian mythology, may be understood as an ironic footnote to this myth, because it shows it as wishful thinking – a phantasmagoria which can only come to life in a fictional space.

The "tales of miserable countries" are frequently countered with exalted and proud apotheoses of this region's history and culture. More interesting, however, are those responses whose authors take up critical analysis of Central European reality. Their diagnoses often preceded, or coincided with, the satirical narratives from the West, but what works to their benefit is that they are not burdened by the ambiguity of the colonial perspective, and their authors, instead of adopting the popular strategy of confessing someone else's sins, chose the much less popular and much more painful practice of acknowledging their own faults. In other words, they appropriate the labels that the West has placed on Central Eastern Europe, not so much in order to deconstruct them, as for a paradoxical identification: indeed, we were, and still are, stupid.

Richard Wagner wrote in his 1985 text (published in Polish in a 1994 issue of *Krasnogruda* as "Wśród braci (Skorowidz wschodnioeuropejskiej nienawiści)" [Among Brothers: An Index of Eastern European Hatred]):

> Eastern Europe is a small region, with borders traced as if by an uncertain hand. The Eastern European country is uncomfortable. Life here resembles travelling second class. The Eastern European country is young. It has only existed for the span of a single human life. […] Eastern European nations don't have much love for one another. When one looks at another, they are consumed by fear, as if scared of their own selves. […] An Eastern European nationalist looks deep into the history of his nation. […] He sees everyone as if through a haze; those deranged, pompous neighbouring nations, who think of nothing but correction of borders and who pretend to be something special. He sees them completely clearly in this haze, and they see him. And since he can't get to them, he spews words, and since they can't get to

him either, they, too, spew words, and this is a repertoire whose origins are lost in the depths of history, and whose beginning is so distant that it simply has to be true. (Wagner, 1994, pp. 201–202)

The discussions about what is and what should be Central Europe, held since the late 1970s and early 1980s, are dominated by two main approaches to this problem. The first one invokes the retrospective utopia of this region as a space of extraordinary cultural variety and richness; a place where cultures, religions and nations intertwined. These narratives underscore the values that this unique mosaic brings / used to bring / could bring to European culture. On the opposite pole, there are voices asserting that such a Central Europe never existed, that for centuries it has been a region torn by ethnic and national strife, civilizationally backwards, forever threatened by the prospect of civil wars, and that it is for the sake of protection against this phantasm, and not returning to the alleged "golden era", that Central Europe should materialize as a cultural, social and political project of deflecting potential conflicts and arranging neighbourly relations according to new rules. Stupidity, immaturity and short-sightedness are recurring categories and rhetorical devices in these discussions,[8] frequently brought up, albeit not always directly, in order to show the source of failure of the Central European project, defined as model coexistence of various nations, religions and cultures within the same geographic area.

Critical reflection over these projects was an irremovable element of debates held in the 1970s and 1980s, even though for obvious reasons it reached broad audiences less frequently, and it enjoyed lesser popularity than the idyllic visions of peaceful coexistence. Already in the third issue of the *samizdat* magazine *Obóz*, readers found a polemical dialogue between the "Optimist" and the "Pessimist", concerning the future fate of Central Europe. The "Pessimist" expressed his doubts as to the likelihood of this project ever becoming reality.

It is not the Russian rule that impedes unification, to the contrary: the inability of the small nations to come together allows Russia to rule them. […] In everyday life, the situation described above is manifested in animosities that neighbouring peoples harbour for one another, animosities that transform into hatred and nationalistic blindness. There are no exceptions to this rule; we all know that the greatest enemies of the Poles are the Katsap, the Heinie [*Szwab*] and the Bohunk [*Pepik*]; of the Ukrainians – the Lyakh [Pole] and the Rus; of the Hungarian – the Rumun [Romanian] and the Tot [Slovak], etc. All of them hate the Russki and the Gypsy. For the time being, this is probably the only possible plane of some agreement. But is it the kind of agreement we want? (Pesymista, 1981)

8 In fact, the concept of stupidity plays a special role in the history of thought / ideas / intellectual life of Central European countries. In the Polish culture, to stay with the examples closest to us, maturity, and the inexorably connected "immaturity", have been key categories in describing the struggles with historical processes and civilizational challenges at least since the times of Stanisław Brzozowski and his critique of "infantile Poland". Marcin Król's confession: "we were stupid" (Król, 2015) has become in the recent years a collective motto for an entire wave of (self-)critical and account-settling reflections and summaries of the results of Polish transformation of the last 30 years.

A similar dialogue stirred up the Czech public opinion even earlier, in 1968, when, in response to Milan Kundera's emotional *Czech Destiny*, written in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel wrote *Czech Destiny?*, in which he cast doubt on the mythology upon which Central Europe had been founded as a region affected by unjust twists of fate:

> The world is not comprised […] of witless and unrestrained great powers and clever and constrained small nations. To […] speak of a "Czech destiny" is to deflect attention from the real causes of our present situation and from the real possibilities for its solution; and it is to absolve ourselves of the unpleasant task of reflecting critically on various ideological dogmas, prejudices and illusions; and it is to dissipate the concrete and demonstrable responsibility of concrete, nameable figures into an impalpable universe of vague historical parallels and abstract contexts. (Havel, n.d., p. 4)

To paraphrase the words by Kundera and Havel, allowing ourselves a certain rhetorical exaggeration, we could say that the "tragedy of Central Europe" was a tragedy of "small stupid nations" who did not recognize their condition and their limits.

The political transformation, which was to be a gauge for the utopian visions of Central Europe conjured since the 1960s, showed that the voices of "pessimists" diagnosed the situation in the region more accurately. According to Krzysztof Czyżewski, "the 1989 Autumn of Nations paradoxically ended in a failure of the idea of Central Europe and of the intellectual grouping that championed it" (Czyżewski, 1994, p. 12). The editor-in-chief of *Krasnogruda* went on to list the factors that contributed to this:

> one-sidedness in writing about the history of our part of Europe (emphasizing the good coexistence and colourfulness of local life while omitting the, after all, quite significant dark spots); the much stronger negative aspect, turning the whole idea of Central Europe against Russia, as a result of which not much was done in the area of building; elitism; proclivity for mythologization; and above all the constant returns to the past (whether Habsburgian or Jagiellonian), which effectively blunted the blade of idea turned toward the future. (Czyżewski, 1994, p. 13)

From the 1990s on, writers and intellectuals from Central Europe began to write more about the crisis of this project, seeing the main reasons therefor in the uncontrolled growth of xenophobic and nationalistic sentiments. In one of his essays, Drago Jančar concluded bitterly:

> […] a time has come to put before her [Central Europe – W. P.] the kind of mirror that does not idealize, but rather shows its true image, […] in which it will see its other face, ugly, distorted by hatred, greed, envy. The face of xenophobia and claustrophobia, antisemitism, national hatred, oppression of minorities, national and cultural as well as social and ideological. If the pursuit of Central Europe means respect for diversity, then later we will have to ask how things really are with that respect, which allegedly has already "made itself at home" here […]. How often declarations of respecting diversity are made by the inhabitants of Central Europe! Yet as soon as this diversity comes near, the respect suddenly ends. (Jančar, 1993, pp. 76–77)

The Balkan War and the disintegration of Yugoslavia were grim mementos for those who participated in the discussions held in the first decade of the Central European transformations, but the memory of these events is fading faster than the biggest pessimists would ever think. The isolationist course underpinned with xenophobia taken by the countries of the Visegrad Group in the face of the crisis caused by the wave of refugees flowing into Europe demonstrated that indeed, as the author disguised under the pseudonym "Pessimist" wrote in the 1980s, "the only possible plane of some agreement" in this region is hatred toward the stranger – in this case represented by the people fleeing North Africa and the Middle East (which, as a side note, does not change the attitudes toward other minorities, as evidenced by the still numerous examples of discrimination and violence against the Roma in the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary).

The year 2016 marked 70 years since the publication of *The Miseries of Eastern European Small States*, a work by Hungarian thinker István Bibó of seminal importance for the Central European discussions. Unfortunately, his diagnoses still hold true. Among the main problems that afflict this region we can still indicate:

> their many territorial disputes; the small-mindedness and aggression of their nationalisms; their willingness to forgo decent political means; their lack of democratic spirit; their bent to political unrealism, to live off not so much their achievements but entitlements and claims, to mutually hate one another, to make gains at the expense of their neighbors, and to be irresponsible in matters of all-European concern; and their political decisions, which are informed not by deep-rooted ideals or serious long-term political concepts, nor their rational self-interest, but their territorial disputes with their neighbors. (Bibó, 2015, p. 163)

Having followed the decades of ongoing discussions, we could venture to state that in the Central European context "stupidity" could indeed be a byword for chauvinisms and xenophobia. The German essayist Matthias Rüb wrote of Central Europe succinctly: "Born out of crisis, buried by catastrophe" (Rüb, 2001, p. 20). Indeed, failure is inscribed in the very project of Central Europe. It could even be said that it is inscribed so dually – firstly, those projects that invoked the retrospective utopia of Central Europe as an area of harmonious coexistence of the multicultural, multireligious and multinational community turned out to be doomed to fail. Secondly, for those projects that polemize with the ones that idealize the past and the present, sometimes in the form of overtly kitschy tales, the point of departure is a recognition of Central Europe as the arena of numerous failures: civilizational, cultural, and political. In their approach, Central Europe is a region where both grand modernizing and emancipatory projects have failed: even though the majority of communities that inhabit this region have acquired the right to self-determination within nation states, the emergence of modern nations took place at the cost of relations with all neighbours, and this state of animosity of everyone against everyone is constitutive for the region of Central Europe. The specific process of rebirth of national awareness often led also to blocking the emancipatory processes of groups other than nations, the consequences of which we can observe to this day.

Perhaps one of the greatest failures of Central Europe that we can observe today is the failure of weakness. The experience of being weak, being the victim, or simply the "poor cousin" of the West, the object of mockery and the butt of jokes, did not translate into greater empathy for the less fortunate. No wonder, as against all appearances, it does not have any integrating potential, it does not strengthen sympathetic attitudes; it is difficult to build a supranational community on the foundation of such experiences. Tomasz Łubieński wrote with bitterness: "We so easily give in to the shameful rivalry of suffering; it is capable of interfering with brotherly compassion" (Łubieński, 2004, p. 181). Wronged by history, or exploiting this experience, the inhabitants of Central Europe celebrate their sense of grievance and monopolize it. Perhaps what we need is, to paraphrase Havel once again, a new Power of the Powerless, a new voice in defence of the weak, and of weakness itself as a constant element of the human, and not only human, condition, an element so deeply felt in this region, and at the same time so carefully effaced from the sphere of interest and attention. If we expand our vocabulary to include the categories of weakness, fragility, vulnerability, we will be able to act more effectively for the benefit of not only human actors, but also of other beings and entire ecosystems which, not only in our region, are the target of mounting pressure, violence and exploitation. We will also be better equipped to counter the hegemony of the neoliberal paradigm, which in the region of Central Eastern Europe is often hidden under the thick disguise of national catchwords and on which this exploitation of both humans and other beings is based.

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„Zrodzona z kryzysu, pogrzebana przez katastrofę". Europa Środkowa jako projekt skazany na porażkę

Abstrakt: Autorka przygląda się obrazom Europy Środkowej tworzonym w różnych obiegach kultury popularnej (satyryczne powieści z nurtu akademickiego, quasi-przewodniki, filmy), a także narracjom na temat mitu Europy Środkowej tworzonym w państwach tego regionu. Przedmiotem artykułu jest namysł nad dwoma modelami opowiadania o tym obszarze – nad wizją utraconej utopii harmonijnej egzystencji kultur, wyznań i narodów oraz nad obrazem „nędznych państw", obszaru zacofanego cywilizacyjnie, pogrążonego w nieustających konfliktach etnicznych i sprzyjającego dyskryminacji wielu grup społecznych. Główne pytanie dotyczy kwestii, jak te narracje wpłynęły na sposób ujmowania przemian związanych z transformacją ustrojową w regionie oraz współczesnych problemów, z którymi się on mierzy.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Europa Środkowa; transformacja; głupota; nacjonalizm; neoliberalizm

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