

From geopolitics and regional identity to
geopoetics and self-identification – a trajectory of
conceptualization of Central Europe?

Da geopolítica e da identidade regional à
geopoética e à autoidentificação – uma trajetória
de concetualização da Europa Central?

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The article problematizes the discourse on Central Europe by tracing a trajectory from the twentieth-century geopolitics and region-building projects based on identity politics to the contemporary geopoeitics and literary self-identifications shaped in relation to place and time. The different historical circumstances that opened and closed “the short twentieth century” produced different experiences and understandings of Central Europe. German *Mitteleuropa* and the renaissance of the idea of Central Europe at the end of the Cold War are the two moments in the geopolitical legacy of the concept. This paper, however, focuses on the second geopoeitic, literary pole of the conceptual trajectory of the discourse on Central Europe, which is nourished by negative categories and consists of particular articulations of being a Central European in a time of historical discontinuities and crises. The paper addresses several contemporary writers’ self-identifications based on “autobiographical sites”, which provide insight into some shared articulations of certain elements of the Central European myth (problematic identity, spatial in-betweenness and sense of transience, mobility of borders, idealized Habsburg monarchy).

Keywords: Central Europe; geopoeitics; Andrzej Stasiuk; Drago Jančar; Robert Makłowicz.

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Este artigo problematiza o discurso sobre a Europa Central, seguindo uma trajetória que vai desde a geopolítica do século XX e os projectos de construção de regiões baseados em políticas de identidade até à geopoeítica contemporânea e às autoidentificações literárias moldadas ao espaço e ao tempo. As diferentes circunstâncias históricas que abriram e fecharam «o curto século XX» traduziram-se em diversas experiências e interpretações da Europa Central. A *Mitteleuropa* alemã e o renascimento da ideia de Europa Central no final da Guerra Fria marcam os dois momentos do legado geopolítico do conceito. No entanto, a ênfase recai sobre o segundo pólo geopoeítico e literário da trajetória concetual do discurso sobre a Europa Central, que se alimenta de categorias negativas e consiste em articulações específicas da ideia de ser um centro-europeu moldado num tempo de discontinuidades e crises históricas. Este artigo debruça-se sobre as autoidentificações de diversos escritores contemporâneos baseadas em «sítios autobiográficos» que dão a conhecer algumas articulações partilhadas de certos elementos do mito da Europa Central (identidade problemática, espaços intermédios e sentimento de transitoriedade, mobilidade de fronteiras, monarquia de Habsburgo idealizada).

Palavras-chave: Europa Central; geopoeítica; Andrzej Stasiuk; Drago Jančar; Robert Makłowicz.

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Cet article problématise le discours sur l'Europe centrale en suivant une trajectoire de la géopolitique du XX^e siècle et des projets de construction de régions fondés sur des politiques identitaires à la géopoétique contemporaine et aux auto-identifications littéraires façonnées en fonction du lieu et du temps. Les différentes circonstances historiques qui ont ouvert et fermé le «court vingtième siècle» ont donné lieu à diverses expériences et compréhensions de l'Europe centrale. La *Mitteleuropa* allemande et la renaissance de l'idée d'Europe centrale à la fin de la guerre froide sont les deux moments de l'héritage géopolitique du concept. Cette contribution met toutefois l'accent sur le second pôle géopoétique et littéraire de la trajectoire conceptuelle du discours sur l'Europe centrale, qui se nourrit de catégories négatives et est composé d'articulations particulières du fait d'être un Européen central façonné à une époque de discontinuités et de crises historiques. L'article aborde les auto-identifications de plusieurs écrivains contemporains fondées sur des «sites autobiographiques» qui donnent un aperçu de certaines articulations partagées de certains éléments du mythe de l'Europe centrale (identité problématique, entre-deux spatial et sentiment d'éphémère, mobilité des frontières, monarchie habsbourgeoise idéalisée).

Mots-clés : Europe centrale ; géopoétique ; Andrzej Stasiuk ; Drago Jančar ; Robert Makłowicz.

I. Introduction

“If I had to invent a coat of arms for Central Europe, I would put twilight in one of its fields and emptiness in some other. The former as a sign of the unobvious, the latter as a sign of the still untamed space. A very beautiful coat of arms with somewhat blurred contours that can be filled in with imagination. Or a dream” (Andruxhovich & Stasiuk, 2007, p. 114).¹ The Central European coat of arms invented by the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk implies the impossibility of a clear definition of this region. Twilight, meaning ambiguity, is accompanied by the emptiness of undefined space due to shifting borders. Both elements are given a more precise shape and form by individual experience and imagination, which is also in search of territorial anchorage. In this quest, the same questions about the area’s coordinates keep coming up: Where exactly is Central Europe? Where are its borders?

The Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš opened his “Variations on the theme of Central Europe” by problematizing the region’s location and its resultant ambiguous status. “With no precise borders, with no centre or rather with several centres, ‘Central Europe’ today looks more and more like the dragon of Alca in the second book of Anatole France’s *Penguin Island*, to which the Symbolist movement was compared: no one who claimed to have seen it could say what it looked like” (Kiš, 1987). Central Europe as an area-specter, devoid of precise frontiers, without a centre or rich in its multiplications, becomes an apparition that defies comprehensive articulation or definition. According to Milan Kundera, “the geographic boundaries of Central Europe are vague, changeable, and debatable. [...] Central Europe is polycentral and looks different from different vantage points: Warsaw or Vienna, Budapest, or Ljubljana [...]” (Kundera, 1993, p. 12).

Central Europe is not unidimensional and thus takes on different meanings depending on national perspectives. How is it shaped by the divergent historical traditions and heritages of the Habsburg Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? As the French scholars Jacques Rupnik and Jacques Le Rider rightly pointed out, there are many Central Europes, depending on the different historical experiences of the states that make up this region. On the one hand, both Czech and Hungarian collective imaginaries trace the genealogy of Central Europe to the territory of the Habsburg Empire. Hence, the region is referred to as “the Danube area”. On the other hand, in the Polish historical imagination, Central Europe denotes a space between the two great powers of Russia and Germany. The Central European area excludes Germany, but includes Ukraine and the Baltic states (Rupnik, 1990, p. 21, cited by Le Rider, 2000, pp. 100-101).

There are thus multiple Central Europes, and the relative nature of the concept becomes even more apparent in the interdisciplinary field of research that has sought to deconstruct both national and regional identities, such as the Orient or the Balkans. The historicization of these identities, which reveals the changeability of their meanings, allows them to be presented as “cultural artifacts” and “imagined communities”. Moreover, as Benedict Anderson noted, the opposition of genuineness/falseness is to be replaced by the plurality of ways in which particular communities are imagined (Anderson, 2006, pp. 4-6). The scholarship that critically reevaluates the essentialized

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Polish and other languages are in my own translation.

approach to spatial distinctions foregrounds “imaginative geography”, which, as Edward W. Said remarked, draws on Gaston Bachelard’s “poetics of space”. According to the French philosopher, the objective side of a given space is foreshadowed by its poetically ascribed qualitative dimension, composed of values and feelings. The “poetics of space” is closely linked with two interrelated processes of othering and self-identification because “imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said, 2003, pp. 54-55).

The meaning of Central Europe depends on the “poetic process” (Said, 2003, p. 55) in the same way as the meaning of Orient, which has been ascribed with different connotations by the French, the British and the Americans (Said, 2003, pp. 1-4, 17-19). Similarly to the Orient, the idea of Central Europe lacks “ontological stability” (Stobiecki, 2020, p. 275)² and thus refers to the intertextual and abstract reality, in contrast to the concept of the Balkans “with its powerful historical and geographic basis” (Todorova, 2009, pp. 11, 160). What Central Europe and the Balkans have in common, however, is their identification with a transitory space between the two poles: the West and the Orient. Consequently, reflection on Central Europe could also be part of what Maria Todorova identified with the Balkans, namely “a discourse about an imputed ambiguity” as opposed to “a discourse about an imputed opposition” which is Orientalism (Todorova, 2009, pp. 15-17).

The concept of Central Europe, as Otilia Dhand emphasized, refers to an idea, a myth, or a project of change that conveys specific desires and hopes for the future (Dhand, 2018, pp. 1, 3). Thus, it is a concept with little correspondence to reality, but with a decisive influence on imagination and identity, which consequently gives this idea a strong potential to change reality and self-identification. The region’s borders are more hypothetical than real, so the concept of Central Europe pertains more to the realm of imagined geography than to cartography and history. It refers more to the metaphorical place, the “autobiographical site” (Czermińska, 2014, pp. 55-74) understood as a basis of self-identification, a particular condition of being in history, than to an external reality enclosed within imposed borders, whose constant redraw undermines any fixed definition of the region.

Methodologically, the article is inspired by the spatial turn, which focuses on the relationship between the individual and a particular place. This seems to be an appropriate theoretical approach in the research on literary manifestations of escape from the fatalism of history (unable to give meaning) towards imagined geography, expressed by many Central European writers and the protagonists of the article. The paper also refers to the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies, comprising anthropology of the senses, geography of the senses, history, sociology, and literary studies, *inter alia*. The olfactory landscape of Central Europe (smell-scape) was emphasized by the Czech

² The author refers here to the concept of (East-) Central Europe. He analyzes it from the perspective of “imagined history”, defined as “the ways of speaking about a certain phenomenon which was/is Central Europe/East-Central Europe rooted in the public discourse comprising various texts of culture”. He is interested in the “look from inside” (central in the context of this article), that is, in the experience of Central Europeans, rather than in the ways in which this region was conceptualized from the outside, in the Western literature.

art historian Josef Kroutvor (Kroutvor, 1990), as well as Andrzej Stasiuk and Yuri Andrukhovych. The role of sounds in defining some Central European places and evoking images from the past was mentioned by Stefan Zweig and Vladimir Bartol. Tastes describe Robert Makłowicz's (Makłowicz, 2021) culinary topography of Central Europe. Czesław Miłosz analyzed the direct experience of tangible materiality of the European landscape in contrast to the fleeting and distant American hyperreality. Some sensuous topographies reconfigure the imagined spatial coordinates of Central Europe, replacing the dichotomy of the desired Western culture and rejected Eastern politics with the southern and northern vectors (Labov, 2019, p. 8).³ Has Central Europe of the twenty-first century literary representations replaced the twentieth-century Cold War West-East geopolitical in-betweenness with the geopoetic meridian points of reference?

The paper will first present a brief genealogy of the concept of Central Europe, accompanied by a short outline of the divisions of Europe, focusing on the change of its coordinates from the horizontal East-West axis to the vertical one North-South axis. The concise introduction to the history of spatial distinctions, which forms the broader background of this study, is followed by its theoretical framework, focused on the shift from geopolitics to geopoetics. The main part of the article explores the latter geopoetic approach to Central Europe by addressing the "auto/bio/geo/graphies" (Rybicka, 2014, pp. 408, 420-422)⁴ of some Central European writers: Andrzej Stasiuk, Drago Jančar and Robert Makłowicz, with a particular emphasis on the first one. These authors were chosen not only because they can be characterized by a "topographic imagination" (Czermińska, 2014, pp. 61-65), but also because in their "autobiographical sites" it is possible to find some common articulations of certain elements of the Central European myth (problematic identity, marginality, spatial in-betweenness and the feeling of transience, the mobility of borders, the idealized Habsburg monarchy, the principle of "the maximum diversity in minimum space"). Moreover, their life-writings are instances of the reconfiguration of this myth enabled by the shift from the retrospective utopia (very much present in the texts of Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth, for example) to heterotopia (Foucault, 2005, pp. 117-125; Dutka, 2014, p. 453), and the role of somatic experiences, which establish one's attachment to a place and shape the sensuous topographies of Central Europe.

II. From geopolitical Central Europe to geopoetic Central Europe being

The reflection on Central Europe has been nourished by the turbulent vicissitudes of the twentieth century. It is therefore a relatively young geopolitical entity. Only on the threshold of centuries did the idea of naming this area emerge, and then the twentieth

³ Jessie Labov, in her book on "Transatlantic Central Europe", also reflects on this change of paradigms in conceptualizing Central Europe, from "the Cold War East-West binary" to the contemporary "post-1989 period" in which "a new axis emerges: that of North-South".

⁴ As Rybicka stresses, "geo" in "auto/bio/geo/graphy" draws attention to the role of space (where am I?, where am I from?) in self-identification.

century witnessed its changing meanings (Cobel-Tokarska, 2013, p. 176). In the ancient times, the map of Europe was divided between the civilized Mediterranean South and the barbaric North. In the Middle Ages, the religious division introduced by the Great Schism redirected this map “horizontally” (Podraza, 2002, pp. 23-287 cited by Cobel-Tokarska, 2013, p. 175). In the eighteenth century, Eastern Europe was invented by the West and the Enlightenment as an intermediary zone abundant in contradictions, elements of both civilization and barbarism (Wolff, 1994, pp. 5, 25, 358). After the Second World War, the clear division of Europe between the East and the West, devised by the “Big Three” Allied leaders, defined the geopolitical order during the Cold War. This long tradition of the Old Continent’s dual order, which ignored its center, was undermined by the dissidents and intellectuals in exile coming from the middle part of Europe. They introduced a conceptual rupture by resurrecting the in-between element, namely Central Europe. What does it mean today, and how was it defined in the last century? Today, one of the first associations is the Visegrád Group of illiberal democracies. Thirty years ago, however, the Central European countries were synonymous with the struggle for values such as freedom and democracy, which were denied in the communist system.

This conceptual somersault in the course of just a few decades clearly manifests the changeability of meanings and definitions of Central Europe, which are contingent on a historical moment. The divergent historical circumstances of “the short twentieth century” produced different experiences and understandings of Central Europe. The attempt to define the region in positive terms, underpinned by geopolitics, was made by economists, politicians (*Mitteleuropa* by Friedrich List and Friedrich Naumann), geographers (Joseph Partsch), historians (Oskar Halecki, Piotr Stefan Wandycz, Jenő Szűcs), dissidents (Václav Havel, György Konrád, or Drago Jančar), and other intellectuals whose historical accounts were responses to particular political situations and thus had visions of the region’s future as their backgrounds. In this regard, their images of Central Europe, by underlining the distinctive nature of historical, economic and political processes (Central European *differentia specifica*, *Sonderweg*) shaping the regional identity, were supposed to bring about some changes in the geopolitical order.

Naumann’s *Mitteleuropa* from the times of the Great War and the renaissance of the idea of Central Europe in the dissident *milieu* at the end of the Cold War are the two important moments in the geopolitical legacy of the concept (Dhand, 2018, pp. 6-7).⁵ Opening and closing the twentieth century, these ideas were characterized by different functions and meanings. While German *Mitteleuropa* from the period of the First World War expressed Prussia’s imperialist agenda towards its eastern neighbors, which later took a radical form in the Third Reich’s *Lebensraum* project, the Central Europe of the 1980s, coined by dissidents in the Soviet Bloc, had an important emancipatory dimension. It was meant to undermine the bipolar geopolitical order of the world and justify the return of Central European countries to the West, because, as Kundera noted, although

⁵ The geopolitical tradition of the conceptualization of Central Europe was thoroughly explored by Dhand, who claims that the concept of Central Europe is underpinned with geopolitics from the very moment it was coined.

they were politically in the Eastern Bloc after the Second World War, culturally they had always belonged to the Western world (Kundera, 1984, pp. 14-31).

Beyond the plethora of different meanings of Central Europe that have emerged in the course of history (the changeability that paradoxically becomes their unchanging characteristic), one element seems to be stable, namely the concept's close link with geopolitics,⁶ which, however, has been recently re-evaluated in contemporary literature. These re-evaluations suggest a certain intellectual trajectory along which particular concepts of Central Europe could be grouped. The main aim of the paper is to attempt to rethink the discourse on Central Europe along this trajectory, which leads from the twentieth-century geopolitics and region-building projects based on identity politics to the contemporary geopoetics and literary self-identifications shaped in relation to place and time; from public debates that openly problematize the concept of Central Europe to private condition of being Central European, implicitly present in literary enunciations. There is a difference between geopolitical and geopoetic approaches to Central Europe, "whether one sees *Mitteleuropa* as a territory to be used, or as a cultural network and repository of memory that needs to be preserved" (Zivkovic, 2015, p. x), or as a sphere of sensuous experience.

Instead of recognizing borders and defining Central Europe in positive terms of *longue durée* processes such as historical evolution, Western culture, or semi-periphery, it is worth turning to negative categories and particular articulations of being a Central European shaped at a time of historical discontinuities and crises. Literature provides an insight into the "disappearing Europe" (Raabe & Sznajderman, 2015), i.e. phenomenological Central Europe, understood as a certain apophatic space that is reflected in individual experiences and appears only as a lack of continuity, stability and other positive categories. The Slovenian literary scholar Simona Škrabec represents this literary (particularizing) approach to Central Europe, which avoids essentializing and generalizing ways of defining the region present in the historical (unifying) perspective (Škrabec, 2013, pp. 31-32). In place of the chronological time of great history and singular identity, the geopoetic perspective accentuates divergent individual perceptions of time, understood as the fourth dimension of space (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 184) (Central Europe), subject to various literary/diaristic reconfigurations and equivalent to memory or the passage of time. The second geopoetic pole of the conceptual trajectory in the discourse on Central Europe would focus on particular self-identifications, viewed as dynamic and reciprocal interactions between experiences of specific places and their artistic representations. While historical narratives can explain geopolitical, top-down projects of Central Europe, literary texts reveal "an unorthodox"⁷ and experienced side of this diversified borderland space in between.

⁶ As Dhand argues, Central Europe's "most consistent characteristic seems to have been its often unpredictable shape-shifting. Invoked by a whole spectrum of ideological streams, its only firm connection seems to be with classical geopolitics and its realist variants in international relations" (Dhand, 2018, p. 8).

⁷ The Bosnian writer Miljenko Jergović stresses this geopoetic, phenomenological way of defining Central Europe: "I believe that we could talk about it in an unorthodox fashion. What is common to all of the peoples living in Central Europe is primarily all the traumas of the 20th century, such as the concentration camps. We are also connected by historical experiences such as being a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the bloc of socialist countries after the Second World War. In one sense, we lived our lives in a border region" (Jergović, 2018).

In this paper, geopoetics is understood as a critical approach to the Western civilization and the cult of reason, similar to that developed by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. This is why I refer to the geopoetics here not as an international movement (only recently founded in the last decade of the twentieth century), but as a worldview shared by many writers (Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Patrick Geddes, Henry Thoreau). The geopoetics promotes holistic thinking centered on the relationship of human beings with the universe and advocates a new way of perceiving the world, a space approached not only intellectually but also emotionally (White, s.d.).

The research on the second geopoetic side of Central Europe becomes crucial, as it has not been thoroughly conducted yet. Scholars tend to analyze the geopoetics (space in literary works) of selected authors, but their results are not subsumed under a broader regional framework. The geopoetic approach, as opposed to geopolitics, seems particularly important today because it can be seen as a theoretical response to the new historical challenges. While the modern period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, obsessed with history, was characterized by ideologies, massive movements, collectivities (Márai, 2001, p. 137),⁸ the geopolitics of totalitarian states; the twenty-first century of individuals could be defined by its focus on geography, manifested in a spatial turn and a shift of accents from time to place. In contrast to self-contained and self-fulfilling ideological “hermetic” worldviews rooted in dialectics and framed by geopolitics, the hermeneutic perspective of this research emphasizes geopoetics. It is understood as a critical undermining of dominant, politicized collective perceptions (Central European identity) in the form of individual questioning present in the texts of selected writers who problematized their relationship with particular Central European places.

The Hungarian writer Sándor Márai, describing one of his first trips to the West, to France in the 1920s, manifests this bottom-up perspective on Central Europe, which, instead of regional identity, emphasizes individual self-identification in relation to a territory that cannot be grasped within borders but only through experience. This perspective also implies the need for a literary and anthropological approach. “The train crossed this invisible line which is marked neither by a semaphore nor by border signs, crossed the border which name is ‘Central Europe’ in which anthropological and cultural radiation we were born and grew up and which organically links and merges into one with this second Europe, and yet it is so mystically different ...” (Márai, 2005, p. 250).

Imagined and “mystically different” Central Europe, identified with a state of mind or “anthropological and cultural radiation”, also includes mythical representations. The Slovene sociologist Mitja Velikonja lists the Habsburg myth (the idealized period of Franz Joseph’s reign), the myth of the cultural nation, and the myth of spatial and temporal transience among the myths that have shaped the collective imaginaries of Central European nations (Velikonja, 1995, p. 29). Many Central European authors expressed these myths in their works. The first one, for example, is very much in evidence in the *oeuvres* of Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth. Many contemporary Central European writers also focus on the myth of both spatial and temporal fleetingness. The location in the

⁸ “It really rises above individual. I am a witness of the collective unhappiness which is caused by a collective delusion”. In another diaristic note Márai remarked that “the eighteenth century liquidated Religion. The nineteenth century liquidated God. The twentieth century liquidates Human” (Márai, 2019, p. 151).

center of Europe has more than once determined the role of the area as a transitional sphere both for military troops embodying the march of great history and for cultural ideas. As the literary scholar, Csaba G. Kiss noted, referring to the Hungarian writer Árpád Tőzsér, the people in Central Europe were living “in the waist of a sand-timer”, where “it has not been easy to remain upright in Europe’s waist and to hold on tight, while innovations, armies, cultural goods, infections and messianic ideals rushed from one bulb of the timer to the other” (Kiss, 1989, p. 129). A literary and geopoetic approach to Central Europe reveals the extent to which the region’s “in-betweenness” has been internalized and existentially imprinted in individual fates.

III. Sensuous topographies of Central Europe

Anecdote, irony and escape from history (turned into parody) *versus* moralism as an active response to the immoral course of events? (Dziamski, 2007, p. 169) The polemic between two Czech intellectuals, Josef Kroutvor and Milan Kundera, whose writings were instrumental in reopening the debate on Central Europe at the end of the Cold War, illustrates well this bifurcation of attitudes toward history in the central part of the Old Continent. Whereas Kroutvor represents the less heroic intellectual tradition that focuses on witty anecdotes, small episodes from everyday life, and sensuous experiences such as smell as indicators of Central European community; the second strand of reflection emphasizes the role of great history and the fateful tragedy of small nations in the region, as problematized by Kundera in his essays and literature. Central European identity could therefore be condensed both in anecdotes, diaristic notes that allow one to distance oneself from the threat of history, and in essays, manifestos written in a pathetic tone in response to a pressing historical moment and political situation. The discussion seems to involve Švejk’s followers as well as those who identify themselves more with Kafka’s legacy (Rybicka, 2014, pp. 395-398). Kroutvor was followed by many contemporary Central European writers who focus on everyday life, concrete materiality and its fragmentary sensuous experience, which at the same time allows for transcendence in search of meaning.

Intellectualism *versus* sensualism? The Polish literary anthropologist, Elżbieta Rybicka signaled the turn from theoretical categories to somatic experiences in the definition of Central European identity in her interpretation of the book *Café Museum* by the contemporary Polish journalist and writer Robert Makłowicz. Makłowicz’s main goal of traveling through Central Europe is not to search for some essence of cultural identity, but to gain empirical experiences. His wanderings have no other purpose than “just to hear another language, eat another kind of soup, try another alcohol, see a different landscape”, or to sleep under a feather duvet, which is common in German-speaking countries, and is more important than to reflect on the concept of time as a significant component of Central European identity (Makłowicz, 2021, pp. 20, 71-72).⁹ His guides

⁹ Referring to Claudio Magris’ reflection on the concept of time in German culture, which is part of Central Europe, Makłowicz stated: “I share the Germanic-chronographic insights of the great Triestine Magris, but for purely selfish reasons, I am closer to another all-Germanic passion, namely the love of quilts”.

are his senses of sight, smell, touch, and hearing. As Rybicka argues, by delineating a culinary, sensual topography of the region in his book, Makłowicz confirms but also reformulates the Central European myth within sensory studies. Thus, it is not only an abstract sphere of spiritual culture that defines a Central European community, but also the sensual experiences, such as the smell or taste of both common gastronomic specialties and their local varieties (Rybicka, 2014, p. 394), as well as, for example, the touch of a feather quilt.

Rybicka briefly presented a change of “ingredients” that can be found in a “recipe for a Central European myth”. In the 1980s, it was defined by the regional cultural heritage (part of the Western culture), the common historical fate (totalitarian regimes), and values (humanism, freedom, democracy, liberalism). The role (purpose and meaning) of the concept was shaped by the historical circumstances that witnessed its emergence. The designation of Central Europe in this period emphasized the shared cultural heritage and values in order to approach the idealized West and to distance oneself from the demonized East. The discourse on Central Europe was highly politicized and implied the parallel acts of distancing oneself from the Eastern politics and economics, and an attempt to return to the West as an integral part thereof from a cultural perspective. The main ingredient of the “recipe for a Central European myth” at that time was the shared spiritual culture. Today, however, as the globalized, open world has replaced the bipolar tensions of the Cold War, the Central European myth is also being reformulated. As Rybicka notes, the previously dominant feature of the Central European myth, namely the spiritual culture, seems to have recently given way to a culture of everyday life and the sensuous experience of a landscape, a change that is visible and traceable in literature (Rybicka, 2014, pp. 392-407).

The shift from intellectual cognizance to existential experience in the conceptualization of the Central European myth is accompanied by a journey, its two dimensions: practical (being on a path) and theoretical (new narrative frameworks and genres). While a few decades ago the essay was the dominant and privileged genre in the discourse on the idea of Central Europe, today it has been replaced by the hybrid travel narrative (Rybicka, 2014, p. 398). Not only does travel contribute to the redefinition of the myth of Central Europe, but it can also take on different meanings in this liminal space when compared to other places. In the central part of the Old Continent, “caught in the tongues of History” (Trávníček, 2009) and thus inundated by historical waves coming either from the East or the West, travel, as Stasiuk remarked, was mostly forced, imposed on people who “left for a foreign war, escaped from armies or from poverty and hunger”. As the author continues, while in the Central European context there was always some external (political or economic) reason for traveling, in other western parts of Europe, in colonial countries such as Portugal or Spain, there was, in addition to socio-economic factors, the important internal motivation – a curiosity about foreign, far-off lands expressed by numerous intrepid explorers. According to Stasiuk, this inner incentive, underpinned by a sense of stability, would be absent in the minds of the inhabitants of Central Europe, who, due to the turbulent course of history, could not feel safe and certain that they would find the *status quo*, their homes, upon their return.¹⁰

¹⁰ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy” [Logbook] in *Moja Europa*, pp. 112-113.

The importance of travel and sensuous experience in the re-evaluation of the Central European myth characterizes Stasiuk's writings. The writer compares his traveling, which lacks linearity and clear destinations, to Švejk's aimless wandering.¹¹ Instead of linear movement, he would rather make circles and get lost. In an attempt "to reconcile his own biography with the space", he used a pair of compasses to delineate his existential topography within a circle from the center where he now lives in the Beskid Mountains in the southeastern borderland part of Poland (village Wołowiec) to Warsaw, where he was born. Both Germany and Russia remain beyond this personal Central Europe, which includes some parts of Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, a fragment of the Czech Republic, almost all of Slovakia, and a third of Poland.¹² Stasiuk's geopoetics consists of travels and sensualist texts that evoke colors, tastes, feelings, sounds, and smells (Kanasz, 2021, pp. 1-28). Geography and the senses are tightly interwoven in his writings, just as "the cartographic net coincides perfectly with the retina".¹³ Stasiuk recalls his identification of European cities with colors: "Paris was grey-blue, London slightly greenish, Madrid brown with the olive tint. Vienna probably reddish pink. Berlin certainly dun". He saw Europe through "a dispersed stained-glass window".¹⁴ The senses indicate his routes and shape his existential topography. Thus, the map of Europe resembles "a plate with a failed dish" or a woman for whom Stasiuk has tender feelings. Reading such a map becomes "a very erotic vision".¹⁵ His narrative is thus imbued with sensual, bodily experiences.

Unlike Kundera and the dissidents, Stasiuk embodies the "Central European spirit"¹⁶ by underlining the role of geography rather than history, and of everyday life rather than shared historical fate or cultural heritage in defining Central Europe. His "obsession was always geography, and never history".¹⁷ It is a geography devoid of any label such as political or economic, which would imply geopolitics. Far from the latter, based on "bastard" political and economic geography, Stasiuk is obsessed with a personal "true geography" equivalent to an "escape which always leads towards south, because east and

¹¹ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 157.

¹² Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", pp. 85-86.

¹³ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 157.

¹⁴ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 147.

¹⁵ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", pp. 99, 118-119.

¹⁶ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 107. Stasiuk mentioned the mystery of the "Central European spirit", the existence of which he said has never been proven or refuted. He added that it sometimes reveals itself to him not only artistically or spiritually, but also physically.

¹⁷ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 134. For more information on the role of geography in Stasiuk's literature see: Magdalena Marszałek, Alternative Categories (Andrzej Stasiuk). In: *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*. Edited by Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, Przemysław Czapliński & Agnieszka Polakowska (pp. 423-427). Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

According to Marszałek that Stasiuk's passion about the geography "allows him to break free of history, which the author sees as the curse of the twentieth century. His topography of the East-Central European provinces presents a landscape of stillness and duration – the antithesis of modernity's historical thought, which is oriented to the future, towards development and progress." (p. 426). In this sense, as Marszałek underlines, Stasiuk's ways of writing, travelling and the nature of space of his wandering are closely interwoven. Non-linear mode of travelling reflects in the fragmented narration of his travelogues and corresponds with the Central European space marked with stagnation and disorder (pp. 425-426).

west are controlled by its bastard sisters”.¹⁸ Although, as he noted, he “should write about the Habsburgs, Hofburg, or at least the ‘Café Central’ and the wax figure of Schnitzler”, all the typical ingredients of the myth of Central Europe, what came to his mind were “only unimportant details and events that could happen anywhere else. At most, they would have a slightly different tempo or color”. On his travels through Central Europe, Stasiuk is accompanied by nostalgia and utopia, provoked not by history or memory, but by geography, by space. It is a nostalgia that longs for a constantly receding horizon, and a utopia that longs for a view that embraces and contains everything.¹⁹

Although the book *Moja Europa: Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkową* (*My Europe: Two Essays on So-called Central Europe*) (2000), co-authored by Stasiuk and Andrukhovych, was published on the eve of Poland’s accession to the EU, it is not underpinned by the ubiquitous fascination and attempt to catch up with the West by “returning to Europe” (Kato, s.d., pp. 91-93). Consequently, Stasiuk distances himself from Kundera’s Central Europe and its geopolitical implications. As the Polish literary critic Przemysław Czapliński noted, “Stasiuk is an anti-Kundera. While the Czech author occidentalizes Central Europe, Stasiuk orientalizes it. Kundera argues that the West has betrayed *Mitteleuropa*, while for Stasiuk it is its elegant conceptualization that has undermined Central Europe. Kundera [...] sees Central Europe as a reservoir of beautiful historical treasures, while Stasiuk sees it as a rusty storehouse of socialist industry and as a market stall stocked with imitations of Western products. While György Konrád, Czesław Miłosz, and Danilo Kiš consider it primarily a bourgeois product, for Stasiuk it is a plebeian map” (Czapliński, 2018, p. 380). The very title of the essays by Stasiuk and his Ukrainian colleague Andrukhovych – *My Europe* – indicates their distance from the geopolitical debates of the Cold War period over the proper mapping of this region, replaced by a focus on their experiences of particular borderlands. These two texts are about the “so-called Central Europe”, which not only implies the relativity of the concept, but also points to the authors’ main goal, which is to go beyond the narrow, politicized understanding of Central Europe as defined by intellectuals and dissidents, and to describe their own experienced part of the Old Continent. It is a borderland region of Galicia where both Stasiuk and Andrukhovych live (Kato, s.d., pp. 91-92).

The title also points to the imposed character of some concepts, imagined divisions of space that do not always correspond to the ways in which the inhabitants of the named places define themselves. If the spatialized identity of Central Europe is necessarily normative and geopolitically underpinned, applied by those in power to change reality, the question arises as to whether the same concept could be equally desirable among those who, instead of shaping and imposing political borders, are forced to experience their shifts in everyday life. According to Kundera “[...] Central Europe never was an intentional, desired unit. With the exception of the Hapsburg emperor, his court, and a few isolated intellectuals, no Central European desired a Central Europe” (Kundera, 1993, p. 12). The concept is imposed either by other more powerful political actors or

¹⁸ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 134.

¹⁹ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 102. His Europe is composed “of details, trifles, a few second-long events, reminiscent of film etudes, of flickering snippets that swirl in his head like leaves in the wind, and through these swirls of episodes shines the map and shines the landscape” (Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 134).

by the Central European nations themselves in the situations of threat and uncertainty in transitive periods such as the transition from socialism to Western liberalism (Dhand, 2018, pp. 3-4, 8-9, 11). The Polish philosopher Krzysztof Pomian emphasized the negative feature inherent in the Central European identity, understood as a community of fate born in transitive moments of crisis (immediately after the Second World War or at the beginning of the 1980s). In this respect, he referred to a short-term “identity produced by a threat” (German or Russian) and thus dependent on historical circumstances (Pomian, 1994, pp. 16-17). Le Rider also mentioned the *ex negativo* way of defining Central Europe in terms of “a community of fate in times of crisis”. He pointed to two critical historical moments when the idea of Central Europe re-emerged: the aftermath of the Second World War, when the central part of Europe came under the control of the Soviet Union, and several decades later, the 1980s, when the discussion of Central Europe was taken up by dissidents and exile writers, who in this respect followed earlier debates on this idea (1933-1945) among emigrants from the region. Consequently, the Central European identity is ephemeral because it depends on a sense of threat. When insecurity and threat disappear, so does this identity (Le Rider, 2000, p. 15).

The above-mentioned unwanted and imposed dimension of the geopolitical legacy of the concept of Central Europe was rejected by Stasiuk, who remarked that “Mitteleuropa” did not correspond to his Central Europe, because “it was only the envoy of the hyperreal West”.²⁰ This rejection sheds some light on another dimension of the term; its geopoetic, experienced side, expressed in the literary images of Stasiuk, Andrukhovych and other contemporary Central European writers. They are not interested in the regional identity, but in their self-identifications with particular places imbued with different layers of time. The peripheral character of Central Europe is embraced and cherished by Stasiuk, who claims that instead of catching up with the West – a goal that has dominated geopolitical debates on this region and is related to its identification with the periphery as a complex – Central Europe should become a distorted mirror of the West reflecting its image as a parody (Stasiuk, 2021, p. 65).²¹ Central Europe identified with the South and the Balkans as a subconscious of the Old Continent – its ‘id’ can remind the Western countries of their suppressed fears, if only their inhabitants dare to look into the depths of Central European “dark well”. This gaze could be very disconcerting, because uprooting from the conceptual and existential old tracks taken for granted (Stasiuk, 2004, p. 119).

In Stasiuk’s writings, there is a clear shift from the desirable images of the region’s future (integration into the EU) to the echoes of the past reverberating during his travels; from the will to assimilate to a sense of “double-distinctiveness” (from both Germany and Russia); from the westward orientation to the southeast and the moving of the centre downward – closer to the Balkans (Czapliński, 2018, pp. 379-380; Tomaszewska, 2014, pp. 61-67).²² Stasiuk’s preferred southward direction becomes an escape from the political geography that imposes on the individual the horizontal confinement between

²⁰ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 152.

²¹ As Marszałek remarked: “From the standpoint of postcolonial theories, Stasiuk effectuates a specific self-orientation of East-Central Europe as a post-imperial (post-Soviet) province subjected to the dominance of a Western European centre.” Marszałek, *Alternative Cartographies* (Andrzej Stasiuk), p. 427.

²² Stasiuk’s “private map brought a significant correction in transferring the centre downward” (Czapliński, *Shifting Sands*, p. 379).

the West and the East.²³ This state of in-betweenness resembles a life on “a floating island” or on a “ship subject to the currents and winds of the East-West and *vice versa*”. To be a Central European, then, is “to live between the East, which never existed, and the West, which existed excessively”.²⁴ The East, identified with the abundance of space, is in fact “the antipode” of the West, characterized by the abundance of time; one is “a mirror” of the other.²⁵ In response to this confining situation, in which geography becomes “more often a trap than a shelter”,²⁶ Stasiuk’s gaze follows “the twenty-first meridian east to Greenwich and falls into the Ionian Sea somewhere near Epitallo on Peloponnese”.²⁷ The border crossing, which takes him to the southern side of the mountains, brings a certain relief to his imagination “bored with west, east, and north”.²⁸

Stasiuk’s southward travels, as Polish literary scholar Jagoda Wierzejska argues, contribute to his “myth of the South as the basis of the myth of Central Europe”, which is part of a vertical, meridional paradigm in reflecting about Europe initiated in the interwar period, in the 1930s, by other Polish writers fascinated by the Balkans. They set out southward in an attempt to re-evaluate the dominant horizontal, parallel paradigm that ‘trapped’ the Slavic nations in an unfavorable position of in-betweenness, imposing the complex of inferiority in the face of the ‘more civilized’ West and the ‘more imperial’ East. This change of paradigms, from horizontal to vertical, made it possible to create “a new version of the Slavic or, more precisely, of the Central European myth, because it was extended by the Finno-Ugric and Romance nations, and in some variants even by the Baltic nations”. First and foremost, this shift in frameworks of self-perception allowed the small nations of the central part of the Old Continent to recover from the complex of inferiority by emphasizing the uniqueness of their historical experiences.²⁹ Wierzejska claims that Stasiuk continues and rewrites this vertical tradition of defining Central Europe. His South is made up of lesser known and more peripheral small towns, villages in countries overlooked by his predecessors-travellers, namely Bosnia, Romania or Albania. He brings the Mediterranean myth closer to the Black Sea and the Danube. Moreover, in his writings, a certain idealization is always overshadowed by the dark side of the conflictual character of the Balkans. Another important component of his idea of South/Central Europe is “a specific vision of the destruction of the creations of civilization and culture. According to the writer, this destruction is a distinctive feature of Central Europe, full of traces and ruins” (Wierzejska, 2012, pp. 73-77, 79-80).

²³ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 134.

²⁴ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 153.

²⁵ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, pp. 134, 95.

²⁶ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 85.

²⁷ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, p. 142.

²⁸ Stasiuk, “Dziennik okrętowy”, pp. 96, 143. According to the writer, Romani people live beyond history, “in pure time and space”.

²⁹ As Wierzejska rightly added, the complex which derives from the horizontal paradigm also gave way to recompensating acts in the form of messianic laic and religious ideas not devoid of martyrological elements and sacralisation of sacrifice. Messianism became a source of moral superiority in relation to both Western materiality, secularisation, spiritual degeneration and Russian tyranny. The Romani people came from these southern parts of Europe, idealized by Stasiuk for their nomadism, which reminds us of the transience and randomness of life (p. 145).

At the same time, as the Polish literary scholar Grażyna B. Tomaszewska argues, Stasiuk's image of Central Europe built upon the myth of the South can be understood as a reinterpretation of the romantic myth of the North. The latter is founded on the distinctions between barbarism and civilization, disorder and harmony, between ruins as traces of the burden of the discontinuous history and great monuments as evidence of long tradition, between authenticity nourished by feelings of instability, uncertainty and falsity accompanied by security. While the authentic side would define the northern part of Europe, falsehood would remain in the South (Tomaszewska, 2014, pp. 61-62). In this line of interpretation, an interesting shift in the coordinates of the region emerges. Central Europe, once understood "horizontally" as an intermediate sphere between the West and the East and identified with the cultural heritage of the West, is now framed "vertically" between the North and the South in the form of a sensuous landscape, lifeworld, or state of being. Southward journeys would move Central Europe in the northern direction. The South thus serves as a new mirror in which Central European writers can find a reflection that echoes a romantic myth of the North.

Another way of conceptualizing Central Europe, which hints at the perspective of geopoetics based on the individual sensual experience of everyday life, refers to the ephemeral meteorological phenomena. Stasiuk also reflects on this motif. Referring to Kroutvor, he mentions both "mythography and meteorology" (Stasiuk, 2021, p. 13) that could describe Central Europe. "When one day everything falls apart, when everything fails, there will still remain ties of temperature, community of meteorology".³⁰ Only meteorological statements describing this region seem to be neutral, impartial, and free of the normative, ambiguous meanings inherent in the geopolitical tradition of this concept. For the Austrian writer Peter Handke, Central Europe could only be defined by weather conditions. Meteorology instead of ideology? Far from the normative meanings, meteorological phenomena, which by their very nature transcend state borders and political divisions, could be for some Central European intellectuals and dissidents a form of compensation for an ideologically shaped life during the Cold War. Moreover, common meteorological phenomena transgress not only spatial borders but also temporal boundaries. Consequently, in addition to a certain sense of freedom from the Soviet confinement, they could also bring about a temporal displacement, diverting one's attention from the present moment to its overwhelming shadow of the past or desirable future.

The Slovenian writer Drago Jančar, in one of his essays, mentioned a moment when he experienced Central Europe in an "exclusively meteorological way", namely when he visited one of the Istrian villages, Opertalj, once inhabited by 500 people, although in the 1970s there were only 17 inhabitants. The mass exodus from the village, as from other places in Istria and in the multiethnic borderlands of Central Europe, was provoked by a change of the borders, which meant a sudden and brutal interference of politics in the everyday lives of the people. The life trajectories became entangled in the whirls of history or were cut short under its blast. However, what remained unchanged in this village and at that time was a strong and cold wind called 'bora', which comes from the north-east and is very often present in the karstic Istrian landscape. As it swept through

³⁰ Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy", p. 114.

the empty streets of the village and embraced the abandoned houses, the bora in Jančar intensified a sense of melancholy (“bittersweet sadness”). The strong wind stimulated memories and hypothetical ways of thinking, rich in images of possible events that could have happened in everyday life in certain places and at certain times.

Meteorological phenomena can intensify not only melancholy but also hope. Thus, meteorological Central Europe is not only an immersion in the past, but also an orientation towards the future. In its negation of national borders, it can feed a utopian image of the borderless region, and consequently, increase the need to cross these artificial boundaries in search of a different, better life. Stasiuk described a storm crossing the Hungarian border as “a cosmopolitan utopia” (Stasiuk, 2021, p. 9), but one that very often becomes unrealizable on a human level. In this regard, Jančar tells the tragic story of a family’s failed attempt to cross the Mura River on the Yugoslav-Austrian border (Jančar, 1999, pp. 33, 35-37). Meteorological Central Europe during the Cold War was therefore very often only an illusion of relief from a political burden and an ideological confinement.

IV. Conclusion

Conceptual attempts to ‘map’ Central Europe have always provoked much debate and controversy. In the 1960s, Karel Kosík, the Czech philosopher, engaged in the dissident movement, defined this region as “a space in dispute and the space of a dispute – a dispute over what this space really is” (Kosik, 1995, p. 153). Dhand used the words like ‘fight’, ‘battle’, ‘argument’, ‘struggling’ and ‘competing schemes’ to describe the long discussion over what this region has meant to different political actors. Central Europe implies a struggle between political interests and intellectual ideas, between actors who forcefully project their visions of Central Europe (German *Mitteleuropa*) and oppose such imposed concepts (the cultural “kidnapped West” of the dissidents politically imprisoned in the East). Therefore, as Dhand rightly noted “Central Europe is as often forged with the sword as it is with the pen” (Dhand, 2018: preface, X, 7). However, the conflictual dimension of this idea provokes not only public debates among politicians and intellectuals, but also penetrates deeper into the individual experience and influences mechanisms of self-identification. Thus, “the battle for Central Europe” also denotes “a clash of various Selves and Others, which will fight for the definition of regional identity” (Dhand, 2018: preface, X, 12), but also for the reconfiguration of self-identification in relation to different forms of cultural otherness. In order to shed light on this individual, phenomenological side of Central Europe, a different non-geopolitical perspective is necessary, which can be found in literature.

The shift from un/desirable regional identity to individual self-identifications introduces a different model of mapping Central Europe, founded on the perception of time, historical experience, and thus also on individual, narrative reconfigurations of the self. On the one hand, there are concepts of Central Europe that emphasize continuities, linear time, and definitions in positive, very often normative terms (what Central Europe is or should be). On the other hand, the second model of conceptualizing the region underscores ruptures, relativity, polysemy and unintentionality, giving way to definitions

in negative terms such as absence or difference. Less normative and less explicitly linked with political circumstances, they emphasize the role of individual everyday experience in mapping Central Europe. Rather than cultural affinities and the identity of the region as a whole, geopoetics brings to the fore Central European ways of being and the sensual experiences of concrete places.

The geopoetic horizon of self-understanding stems from an undesirable *status quo* in the spatial sense of an imposed spatialized identity (Central Europe) and in the temporal sense of an ideologized historical context. Uninformed by a political, future-oriented agenda that entails an active engagement with the political reality of the here and now, geopoetics directs the self inward, both backward and forward in time (diaristic, Husserlian temporality). Interwoven with travel, exile, and life writing, geopoetics implies a certain transgression, changeability, and search for being elsewhere (a hypothetical way of being). The writers at the center of this paper, who follow the path of geopoetics, are not interested in the regional identity. They are first and foremost absorbed by their self-identifications, expressed in literary worlds and shaped in connection with changing places – destinations of their numerous travels.

In this context, the geopoetics functions as a counterpoint to modernity and the geopoetic Central European condition as an alternative to modern, twentieth-century Central Europe understood as a laboratory³¹ of ideologies in which history, idealized as an object of philosophical reflections ('isms'), was tested. Far from directly intervening in external affairs to transform them, the geopoetics would rather advocate an internal narrative reformulation of the self *vis-à-vis* the time of history and space (spatialized identity). The geopoetic response encourages retreat and the mitigation of possible dissonances between the world and the self through travel and artistic creation.

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³¹ The metaphor of the laboratory seems to have permeated the historiography of East Central Europe. As Wandycz remarked: "At times East Central Europe has resembled a laboratory in which various systems are being tested. Adam Ulam called the region in the post-Second World War era a 'laboratory of neo-imperialism.' In the early 1980s, Poland was described as a laboratory for political change" (Wandycz, 2001, p. 9). Political scientist Barbara J. Falk makes a similar argument stating that "East-Central Europe was and remains a laboratory for all the political and economic experiments and disasters of the twentieth century" (Falk, 2003, p. 4. See also Stobiecki (2020, pp. 289-290).

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