

[講演]

Territory, Identity and the Obstacle of Multiplicity. Central European Narratives

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1. Introduction

No one can exhaustively and definitively answer the question of how many countries are included in Central Europe, because it is not clear what determines the membership. Certainly, Polish society has a similar history to that of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and many others in this part of the continent. Having common history, they do not have a common language. Also, they are not joined by common political or cultural representations.

It seems, however, that in the mid-1980s, one feature emerged, connecting all countries included in Central Europe. It was a common goal—to join the European Union. But now, in 2018, it has been clear for a decade that this aspiration has taken a separatist character. Three main Central European countries (Poland, Czech, Hungary) would like to remain in the European Union, but on a separate basis, without any obligations and without complying with a uniform policy. My paper—although submitted to the rigor of a small volume—will discuss the basic factors responsible for the crisis in common geography.

To achieve this goal, I propose to divide the whole period into three shorter stages. Their names are: assimilation, internal divisions and separate integration. They correspond to history. The first of the period, time of assimilation, covers the years 1984–2004; the second—internal divisions—is the years 2005–2015. And finally, autonomous integration covers the years 2015 to present.

2. Stage Number One: Assimilation

Central Europe emerged from historic oblivion in the mid-1980s—due to Milan Kundera’s essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” (Kundera 1994). In an essay, the Czech writer depicted the drama of Poles, Czechs and Hungarians who, due to the Yalta decisions, found themselves under the domination of Soviet Russia. Disagreeing with their detachment from Western Europe, they raised revolts—in Hungary and Poland in 1956, in Poland and the Czech Republic in 1968, in Poland in 1970 and 1980.

The reason for the rebellions was to experience the difference between their own cultural heritage and the new political order. Central Europe is a multiplicity of nations,

cultures, faiths and languages; the region did not use (in Kundera's terms) a force to solve conflicts, because Central Europe embodied the principle of "maximum diversity at the minimum of space" (Kundera 1984: 33); Russia was built on the opposite rule of "minimum diversity at the maximum of space" (Kundera 1984: 33). By building this opposition and basing it on an idealized image of Central Europe and a horrifying image of Russia, the writer did an unusual thing: he distinguished Central Europe from many countries oppressed by the Soviet Union, making it an internally coherent creation with its own traditions; he introduced to the pan-European debate the image of the area in which culture is authentic; he proposed a cultural (and not political!) narrative that became the basis of the supranational language of resistance to the Soviet Union. Also in this way he justified the right to make demands towards the West. In his view, Soviet Russia turned out to be a colonizer of culturally alien spaces, and Western Europe turned out to be a traitor who in exchange for security and satiety abandoned the younger sister. Despite the simplifications (thanks to it?), Kundera turned geopolitics into geopoetics. Throughout the post-war period, the map of Europe was hostage to ideological determinants. The alliances were based on recognizing the immutability of borders, and so on the inviolability of narrative. The essay on Central Europe launched the imagination and the map turned out to be a derivative of the story, not of the politics.

Central Europe in the shape repainted by Kundera was an expression of longing for the former, stable, peaceful and safe world of bourgeois Europe. This longing let them believe that war, the Holocaust and communism were only a suspension of time, a break, after which the history would start again without interruption.

In numerous polemics with the Kundera essay, the unified image of Russia and Russian culture was questioned, the idyllic image of Central Europe without violence was undermined, the area was extended to the Baltic states. However, despite the fact that the extent and identity traits were being squeezed, in the second half of the 1980s, the entity known as "Central Europe" was considered a full-fledged inspiration. Neither the factuality of the story itself nor its usefulness in building Europe were questioned. The goal was accepted: the cultural-geographical map told by Kundera led to the westernization of the eastern countries, and thus to the acceleration of history, which should end with the re-joining of the Center to the West. Since the categories embodied in such geopoetics were considered credible, then after the collapse of the Soviet empire and after regaining independence by the former dependent states, history began to move towards the direction set by Kundera.

From the beginning of the 1990s, the history of Central Europe began to take place—which is a very rare case—under the essay: in 1991, Poland, Czechoslovakia (since 1993—the Czech Republic and Slovakia) formed an alliance called the Visegrad Group, which based

new relations between states on a common cultural tradition. The same countries in 1992 created the CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement)—the first international alliance using the term “Central Europe” as a full-fledged political category; in 1994, Central European countries applied for membership of the European Union, signed the accession treaty in 2003, and in 2004 officially (together with seven other countries) were admitted to the European Union.

Joining the pro-European orientation of the idea of the “Centre” with the victim status suggested by Kundera produced an image as inspiring as it was dangerous, since it led to thinking in unequivocal terms. Literature was able to maintain its independence only by undermining both the Central European myth and the myth of the unification of the Centre with the West.

Half of this task was accomplished by novels that evoke the notion of Central Europe in order to undermine platitudes of unification. Their authors—Stefan Chwin: *Esther* (1999) and *Dolina radości* ([The Valley of Joy], 2006), and Paweł Huelle: *Inne historie* ([Other Stories], 1999), *Mercedes-Benz* (2001), and *Castorp* (2004)—proposed a model for contesting the present and the forces prevailing in it from the perspective of Central Europe. They invoked Central Europe from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a form provided by Kundera: bourgeois, fair, not ideologized, practicing a fluid identity opposed to nationalisms and violence. This was a Europe of societies and cities, not states and nations; capitalist, but exchanging money for art; technologically advanced, but using innovation to enjoy life’s pleasures. This Europe was to be a counterweight to present-day Europe, which in the novels of Chwin and Huelle appears as a continent that is globalizing, disrespectful of local differences, consumerist, and threatened by fundamentalism and nihilism. For present-day Europe, Central Europe from a hundred years ago, was meant to be a lesson in a different culture, useful in staving off postmodern dangers.

It was a valuable and useful lesson of criticism, since the first concept of integration was expressed in the idea of assimilation. Nobody talked about local traditions, because the prevailing tendency was to connect Central Europe with the European Union on the rights and according to rules already functioning in the Union. The problem was that such a connection was based on asymmetrical relations—on the difference of potentials and rationality.

Thus, from the point of view of political and economic procedures, 2004 ended the previous striving for the institutional rooting of Central Europe in the Union. From the point of view of cultural and social processes, this end took on a completely different, chronic and unexpected form.

3. Stage Number Two: Internal Divisions

It might seem that there was no contradiction between the Central Europe's goals and the pragmatics of the European Union. But the impression—or illusion—could only be sustained if the Central European map created by Kundera was undifferentiated.

Andrzej Stasiuk draws another map¹. The discursive gesture that prompted the writer's intervention into the debate surrounding the Centre was his publication, along with Yurii Andrukhovych, of the book *Moja Europa* [My Europe].² In the essay in this volume entitled "Dziennik okrętowy" [Ship's Log], Stasiuk describes the creation of his own Central-European territory.

The line runs more or less through Brest, Równe, Chernivtzi, Cluj-Napoca, Arad, Szeged, Budapest, Żylina, Katowice, Częstochowa, and ends where it begins, that is, in Warsaw. Inside that line is a chunk of Belarus, quite a lot of the Ukraine, substantial and comparable spaces in Romania and Hungary, almost the whole of Slovakia and scarps of the Czech lands. And, yes, around a third of the Polish fatherland. There's no Germany, no Russia—which I note with a certain surprise, but also with discreet atavistic relief. (*Moja Europa* 77–78)

If we treat Stasiuk's conception here not just as a private map, but also as a certain configuration of the consciousness of the inhabitants of Central Europe, we can notice several simple implications and several complex changes.

One implication relates to the absence of Germany and Russia in the discourse of Europe of the Centre. If we ignore the few ideas from the 1990s that looked at the Hansa cities and the community of cultures of the Baltic region, no one has ever really managed to speak about Germany as a part of Central Europe.³ Stasiuk confirms this absence when he makes it apparent that the ability to travel to Germany is not the same as feeling any connection with German culture (he writes in greater detail of this in *Dojczland* [Doitschland]). The issue with Russia emerges in the same way: not many people have any notion how to integrate Russia, and so the majority notes with a certain grim satisfaction the return of Russian imperialism, which justifies a pruning of the map.⁴

Ostensible arbitrariness of Stasiuk reveals the usurpation of Kundera. The Czech writer reached for the Austro-Hungarian history, but he did not include Ukraine, Romania, Yugoslavia and even Slovakia; he created Art Nouveau Arcadia, omitting the colonial process of birth and covering various slaughters. This is not a map of Kundera, but Stasiuk's cartography is closer

to the historical reality.

The serious change proposed by Stasiuk involves shifting the centre (of gravity) down the map. This shift results in a radical reversal of a tendency from the last twenty years: in the mid-1980s, an orientation of the map towards the West and against the East (Russia) was an attempt to join Poland (and the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Hungary) to Western Europe. The Central-European discourse suggested by Stasiuk establishes a space that is different from West and East. The former vector was horizontal, linking Central Europe with the culture of the Mediterranean; Stasiuk's vector runs vertically, southwards from Poland, and creates a territory of Central Europe, which he sets against both West and East. Thus, Stasiuk's Central-European discourse constitutes a double separation, and not an integration.

In a series of books—*Zima* ([Winter], 2001), *Jadąc do Babadag* ([On the Road to Babadag], 2004), *Fado* (2006), *Dojczland* ([Deutschland], 2007), and *Dziennik pisany później* ([Diary Kept Afterwards], 2010)—Stasiuk describes a new Europe, and setting it against Western Europe, he explodes myths of unification.

When at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the process of European unification began, all this was accompanied—to put it crudely—by three myths.

The first said that the continent would be an administrative unity and a cultural diversity. The Europe of small homelands was to be an area in which during the daytime we would all build up capital, and in the evenings, and for sure at weekends, we would cultivate our local traditions. There would be a place for everyone in the process of modernization, but no one in this process should lose his or her identity.

The second myth said that Western Europe could give us much, but also gain much from us: in return for developed technology, inventions, and specialists, we would bring our spirituality to the common good. The exchange would be a just one; the disproportion of gifts would humiliate no one, and we were not to be ashamed of our poverty. After all, a historical settlement, a balancing, was taking place. We were gaining a place in a powerful administrative structure, and the West would recall culture, the value of belief, the importance of metaphysical ties. We would get modernization; we would pass on spirituality.

The third myth spoke of the fundamental identity of the whole area, a result of common bourgeois-democratic traditions and of a general consent to the only possible historical path, which was the drive to the West. In an abbreviated form, one that was frequently used, the argument was put forward that the truth of this part of Europe, that is the truth that it fundamentally belongs to the West, is expressed by the spiritual capitals—such as Lviv, Prague, Budapest or Cracow—which retain the traces of all the epochs of European culture and all the destruction caused by wars or totalitarianisms.

Meanwhile, Stasiuk writes—let’s start at the end—that if there exists a “truth” of Central Europe, this can be seen not in the capitals, but in the provinces. There, in places no one has ever heard of (where *is* Babadag?), in spaces of “postindustrial clusterfuck,” in the desert that really-existing socialism left behind, there the truth of Central-European life lies. It is the truth of the province and its inhabitants, who in the historical process were always treated as colonial collectivities. The people living in this area were never vested in historical agency: feudalism, the absolutist state, communism only meant new forms of supervision, pressure, or exploitation; they did not, however, alter the fundamental relationship between the colonized majority and the colonizing minority. The Emperor Franz Joseph—who comes up in Stasiuk’s narratives—is idealized not because he created Arcadian conditions for the coexistence of diverse nations, but because he interfered in their lives to a minimal degree. So Stasiuk convincingly argues that shoving the splendid cities of Central Europe under the noses of the Western Europeans is a result of a provincial complex—a complex consisting of the province’s sense of its own nothingness, but also a complex that compels a shame-driven covering up of vast territories of a cultural desert.

Then, contrary to the myth of mutuality, Stasiuk says, the movement is in one direction only. The Centre expects money from the West; the West from the Centre wants nothing at all.⁵ So, there is no question of mutuality. Not only because the rich give the impression of being satiated and superior, and so of being totally uninterested in receiving anything. But also, because—according to Stasiuk—Central-European spirituality is marked by consent to the transience and failure of human effort, and, thus, something which the West really does not want at all. Central-European metaphysics, as Stasiuk understands it, is a physics of decay, a gnostic acceptance of the destructive operations of time. The consequence is that a dialogue of European modernity with the spirituality of the Centre is an illusory one, and the modernization coming to Central Europe is really just modernization—an agglomeration of technical and administrative solutions calculated on weakening the role of the local culture.

Third, contrary to the myth of the administrative unity of a future Europe and its local diversity, Stasiuk stubbornly spins a tale of how a united Europe will not be so much a continent of small nations, but a territory of large concerns.⁶ Regions and cities will be spread out under the high totems of Esso, Mercedes, Volvo, or Nestlé, losing thereby not only a local, but even a European character.

Stasiuk, thus, reveals himself to be the anti-Kundera of Central-European discourse. The Czech writer occidentalizes Central Europe. Stasiuk orientalizes it. For Kundera, it was a territory betrayed by the West; for Stasiuk, it is a territory betrayed by an elegant conception of Central Europe. For Kundera (and also for Chwin and Huelle) it is a reservoir of beautiful

monuments; for Stasiuk, it is a rusting warehouse of socialist industry and a kiosk full of knock-offs of Western goods. For György Konrád, Czesław Miłosz, or Daniel Kiš, it was, above all, a bourgeois territory; for Stasiuk—just as for his great predecessors Josef Kroutvor or Joseph Roth—it is a plebian region. Proponents of integration spoke of Central Europe as an intermediary stage. Stasiuk treats it as an impassable one. Central Europe (extended as far as the Balkans) is, as Stasiuk sees it, a crooked mirror: the inhabitants of the Centre will never attain the level of civilization in the West, and the only gift that they can offer the West in any exchange is a parody of postmodernity. The Centre apes the west, since involuntarily it exposes the fact that through its unifying myths, the West has renewed its civilizing mission, and simultaneously that mission is just a technologically advanced version of the petty-bourgeois background.

After Stasiuk's interpolation, Central Europe found itself in a strange state: excessively stretched—to the Central-East-South area—it became an incoherent conglomerate, united by the community of fate, not culture. The writer insistently stressed that the Center is a society that remembers the weakness of its own countries and the strength of foreign colonizers; this is an area overburdened with destruction from the communist period, held in the past by poor infrastructure and by underdeveloped small towns; it is a collective memory in which the semi-slavish condition of the masses going through subsequent epochs has become established. The latest modernization comes here in the form of an excessive consumer offer and a lack of real help. Plebeian majority, provincial weakness, semi-peripheral dependence—this is the true face of Central Europe. Forget about this in the process of unification is to arrange a parody of integration. Remembering this is to give the integration process a greater chance of being fulfilled.

The sum of these features attests to the fact that Stasiuk orientalizes the Centre. And Central Europe has changed into Central Eastern Europe. That is why the writer chooses eastern and southern areas, which permit him to expose cultural exotica incomprehensible to the incomer, civilizational tardiness, poverty, and a specific passive activeness, consisting in transforming life into an arduous waiting. However, it is a purposeful activity, directed against constraints related to European integration, globalization and capitalism. Stasiuk recognizes in this way that Western-European ambitions condemn the Centre to surrender to yet another process of colonization.

The first colonization took place in the Habsburg era, that is during the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1870–1914). Its essence was to minimize the interference of the authorities to preserve the state of provincial underdevelopment. The second colonization had a totalitarian character: after World War II it assumed the form of a communist totalitarianism.

The essence of communist period was an attempt to reconcile social equality with accelerated economic development, aimed at achieving independence from the West and capitalism. The fall of communism was synonymous with the fall of the idea of progress and equality. With this comes the third colonization—neoliberal one; it meant the withdrawal of the state from the mediation between the labor market and the employee. This strategy of the withdrawn state meant that the era of freedom for the stronger and equality for the better came. The postmodernism took form of modernity without obligations and without its key ideas (equality, justice, progress, solidarity...).

Therefore, Stasiuk collects signs of the worse, deploying orientalization as a language of self-defence against neoliberalism. For the writer, the obviousness of Central Europe is the unnamed postcolonial condition. He narrates this condition not in regular essay, but in vagrant prose; his travel notes have a loose structure, close to the diary; a monologue with a changing rhythm prevails in them, as if the author collapsed into a monotony of driving and woke up from it at stops. He travels compulsively and ecstatically: his trips (and descriptions of expeditions) have no plan, and therefore no end. Scenes of meetings with the inhabitants of the Ukrainian, Romanian or Albanian provinces take place in silence: what people could say to each other can be seen all around, so it does not have to be said. There is no idea in this prose—it is their contestation; the initial volumes (from *On the Road to Babadag* to *Dojczland*) were the praise of the freedom of the writer: on his behalf, the author rejected the universal European entity, believing that the nomadic community of the Center would also be able to defend against it; in the last volume (the *Diary written later*), he observes the intensification of the renationalization process in Central Europe. The center—neither politically integrated with the West nor separate, slightly modernized, somewhat traditional—breaks down into separate parts. This can be called the state of internal divisions. And this is a double condition: first, European Union is divided into two, western and central, parts, because Central Europe separates from the Union, and second—individual states in Central Eastern Europe isolate themselves from each other. There is no unity within Union and there is no integrity within Central Eastern Europe. The integration ended with disintegration, because the extension of Central Europe went far beyond the limits of integrational forces.

I think that the way of creating relations between the Central Eastern European states and the Union stems from political imagination. And political imagination is the art of inventing a story. The purpose of such a story is to connect different societies to simulate the better whole and to connect different times to simulate the better future. In the context of these observations, serious differences between the first and the second policy can be explained in literary terms. The first stage, beginning in the mid-1980s, was marked by a postmodernist

burgher novel. The term is an oxymoron, and this oxymoron expresses contradictory desires: the idea was to have multiplicity and unity, stable bourgeoisie and capitalism for all, security and Europe without borders, pluralism and a common system of values, regional identity and freedom from the communist past.

Gradual disintegration has been deepening since the entry of Central European states into the European Union. Year 2015, that is, the arrival of a wave of immigrants from Central Asia and Africa to the southern shores of Europe, reveals multiple divisions. In this year, neither Central Eastern Europe wants to obey Brussels' instructions, nor does any Central Eastern European country want to help its neighbor.⁷

This was a shift from postmodern bourgeois novel to constellation narrative. One can find it perfectly expressed by the prose of Jáchym Topol, Dubravka Ugresić or Andrzej Stasiuk. A constellation narrative does not refer to any whole, because the authors do not see any of that. Their journeys are rather marking separate points on the map, which can only be joined with ad hoc lines. It is mostly the past that distorted and broke the unity. The past occurred a heavy burden with the Holocaust, the communism era, and the underdevelopment. You cannot free yourself of this by simply decreeing the unity of Europe, because the past creates a state of inferiority.

The postmodernist burgher novel led to the unification of Central Europe with the European Union; but the political narrative imagination behind this unification was also responsible for numerous errors and omissions—above all for abandoning the protective functions of the state. The constellation narrative corresponds to the stage of loss of illusions; therefore, the literature of this period is marked by melancholy, which says that unity—that is, coherent wholeness of the European Union and Central Europe—has never been possible in full and will never happen.

Now we can go to the third stage.

4. Stage Number Three: Autonomous Integration

Let me remind you: first stage, with its postmodern bourgeois narrative, was aiming at the connection of Central Europe with the European Union. A key but deeply hidden assumption was that the past could not prove stronger than the present and that the differences were weaker and less important than common values.

The second stage occurred when it turned out that the Central Europe connection with the Union entailed problems stronger than unifying solutions. The postmodern bourgeois novel was replaced by a constellation narrative, because the cultural and political imagination were not able to create a unifying narrative. Europe, imagined as a unity, changes into a divided

union. And state of belatedness, economic underdevelopment, asymmetry of countries, summarized into a tendency to autonomy.

To say that there is no unifying narrative doesn't mean that there are no narratives at all. Let us look at some of them. I chose the ones that seem the most symptomatic of the previously outlined conflict resulting from insubordination. It will sound strange, but one of them is itinerary rather than literary.

Here, firstly, in recent years work has been activated on the construction of two transcontinental routes—Rail Baltica and Via Carpathia.

Rail Baltica [Map 1] is a greenfield railway infrastructure project to link Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with a European standard gauge rail line, providing passenger and freight service between the countries and improving rail connections between Central and Northern Europe. As one of the priority projects of the European Union (Trans-European Transport Networks) it should act as a catalyst for building the economic corridor in the Northeastern Europe.



Map 1: Rail Baltica

Via Carpatia [Map 2] (also Via Carpathia) is a European-built international route of North-South relations, connected in stages between Klaipeda in Lithuania and Thessaloniki in Greece. The road will go through Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, acting as a transport route leading along the eastern border of the European Union, from Central Europe to Asia, crossing corridors leading from Western Europe to Russia and connecting through the Black Sea ports with the TRACECA route (Europe—Caucasus—Asia). The route along the entire length is to have the parameters of a motorway or expressway.

TRASA VIA CARPATIA



Map 2: Via Carpatia

One may ask, what two international routes have in common with literature. I think that they are narratives—and they belong to different and conflicted ideas of storytelling.

Rail Baltica is a road that refers to countries belonging to the Baltic Sea basin. It has its geographical justification and, moreover, it is a part of railway web, projected to link

Northern and Central Eastern Europe with the rest of the continent. Via Baltica, therefore, can be considered the first integration narrative constructed outside the core area of the dispute and beyond the collection of conflicting values. Its aim is to connect in a non-forced way, to expand the common communication platform. It determinates nothing, but it strengthens and allows a lot. It is integration projected as a set of possibilities, not as a list of rules.

Rail Carpatia, as we see, differs greatly. Not only because it is a route for cars. First of all, the difference concerns the model: Rail Carpatia was planned as a vertical axis marking the eastern border of Europe—as the delimitation of Central Europe from the east. It seems significant that Belarus and Ukraine are excluded from this idea of Central Europe, while Greece and Turkey are included into it. Secondly, Rail Carpatia intersects with transverse railway lines running from west to east, but it has the character of a development alternative, and not a network integrating Central Europe with the European Union. In other words, Rail Carpatia is a reinforcement of the isolationist strivings of Central Europe—both from the West and from the East. However, thirdly, there is a clear striving to connect countries belonging to the entire vertical axis. It is therefore the first action for the internal integration of Central Eastern and Southern Europe—on the rights and according to the rules dictated by this quasi-region itself. Of course, the plan is somehow naïve and the present progress of work at Rail Carpatia is pathetic. But even if it overestimates the role of independent, regional power, it symptomatizes the isolating trend.

Thus, Via Baltica belongs to the geo-cultural imagination of the first stage, whereas Rail Carpatia—even if it is condemned to failure—belongs to the third one. It is intended to integrate eastern part of Europe as the entity (or region) independent of the European Union. One can read it as the concept of **autonomous and isolated integration**.

Thus far I was talking about medium size politics and regional rules. Literature, however, has the right to seek an exception, not rules, to doubt existing versions of history, to uncover problems, and not to solve them. Jakub Frank (1726–1791) turned out to be such an exception—he was chosen by Olga Tokarczuk as the hero of the 1000-page novel *Księgi Jakubowe* ([The Books of Jacob], 2014).

Jakub Frank was the creator of the Jewish religious sect, a politician, a religious reformer, and a self-proclaimed messiah. He was born a Podol Jew, died as a German baron; before settling in Poland for a long time (1755–1773), he lived and worked in Turkey, Romania and Greece. He believed many faiths without keeping faith: he abandoned Judaism in favor of Sabbateanism, then adopted Islam, converted from Islam to Roman Catholic denomination. He created his own religion, but just before his death he probably accepted Orthodoxy. He lived in eight countries, spoke five languages, confessed three gods, and finally he considered himself

the incarnation of a fourth one. He belonged to almost all cultures of Central Europe and was rejected by all of them.

In a sense, Frank was a messiah who led Jews out of the captivity and led to the Promised Land. The Jacob's book of departure (the entire novel Tokarczuk is the apocryphal of the Old and New Testaments) began in Poland: under the leadership of Frank, a group of 2,000 Polish Jews adopted baptism in Lviv in 1759; in 1773 they left Poland for Moravia and settled in Brno, where they achieved considerable autonomy; then they moved to Vienna, where Frank became the protégé of the empress Maria Teresa; after her death, in the absence of favor from the Emperor Frank, he moved to Offenbach am Main in 1786, where he obtained the title of Baron and lived in a rented castle. Already after the death of Frank, an official of the Vienna court wrote: "We managed to create this sect a kind of state in a country that has its own rules, has its guard, and most settlements run outside any banking system" (Tokarczuk 2014: 844).

The state, the law, the army—Frank made the three most important longings of the Jewish Diaspora come true. He strived for it regardless of moral costs. First he declared his readiness to convert to Catholicism (in return for obtaining noble titles), because he understood that only this would ensure equality in Poland for Jews. Then he allied himself with every ruler who was willing to grant collective autonomy to the community—land, treasure, army. Even if he came from a different dimension of history, his political thought was modern. He was a Zionist *avant la lettre*.

In spite of modernity, Frank's thinking was traditional: his "state" was authoritarian and patriarchal, so the bodies of young men were marooned and the bodies of women were given men's delights; it was also a very "unproductive" state, because apart from useful things, such as education, a lot of energy was devoted to the rituals of representation—demonstration drills, court etiquette—without achieving permanent autonomy on the map of Europe.

He made mistakes, suffered stupid defeats, committed immoral acts. And yet, it is necessary to notice that his whole life was subordinated to working out the conditions of equality. He wanted the religion he invented to be considered equal to other monotheistic systems, the Jewish community would stop suffering persecution, the land given to them would not be subject to anyone. In the heart of Central Europe, Jakub invented a Europe of solidarity, which arose conflict between autonomy and equality.

This conflict leads us directly to the present era. The bridge over the epochs was shifted by the author herself, applying the present tense in the whole novel (and also leading the story to the Holocaust, which a handful of Jews from the home village of Jakub survived hidden in a cave). Grammatical tense extends the present: experience of exiles of the eighteenth century announces Europe's troubles of the second decade of the 21st century; the appearance

of the messiah realizes that without heretics great religions freeze in rituals, and the clash of faith with power at the beginning of the Enlightenment presets today's problems of de-secularization of the state. Standing in the midst of these problems and trying to escape from them, Jakub Frank turns out to be the embodiment of the foreignness of each migrant. Or even: the embodiment of foreignness of all migrants. And this condensed personality makes him a universal figure.

Let's compare. I combined three narratives—Via Baltica, Rail Carpatia and the *Books of Jacob*. I will use the right to a mental shortcut and say that Via Baltica is an **integrating narrative**, Via Carpatia—an **autonomous narrative**, and the *Books* is a story about **striving for equality**. It seems that this is the trilemma of Central Europe: the people living in this territory must choose between three values—integration with global capitalism, sovereignty or democracy. The drama of today's Central Eastern European situation is that we can choose only one of three.⁸ Whoever decides to integrate, loses autonomy; who wants to preserve sovereignty in the relations with the European Union, separates themselves from the Union; whoever chooses democracy, will have a difficult connection with global exchange networks and will not retain necessary sovereignty towards stronger states and corporations.

In this sense, the narratives about Central Eastern Europe seem to foretell the troubles of the entire Union. Trouble is not so much future as it is happening, if we realize Brexit and Italy's intentions to leave the Union. It seems, therefore, that the trouble will be mastered by those who invent a narrative that combines integration, democracy and a sovereign state. That is why it is worth reading Central Eastern Europe literature as a political message, and the politics—like literature.

5. Summary

In the previous sections, I presented broadly understood narratives that configured Central Europe in various ways. These narratives widened the set of questions. Initially, the only question was: what narrative can unite Central Europe with Western Europe? In the first decade of the 21st century, the next question arose: can integration with the Union cover the whole area of Central Europe? And finally, in the 2010s, the third question came up: can one belong to the European Union and simultaneously pursue a separate policy subordinated to the interests of Central Europe?

When asked about the unifying narrative, the literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s responded in a secretly cruel way: the postmodern burgher novel said that the integration narrative must be exclusive—it must omit the eastern and southern areas of Europe (Ukraine, Belarus, the Balkans), first and foremost choosing similar to the West. Therefore, integration

novels primarily exposed culture, treating it as a common area for Central and Western Europe. However, the exclusion of eastern and southern countries meant that the postmodern burgher novel would not consider either the communist period or the Holocaust, jumping over these problems and treating them as a foreign body not belonging to the history of the region.

The first narrative was too narrow. Excluding poorer post-communist countries (Romania, Ukraine, Albania and others), it overlooked the drastic economic inequalities and the role that anti-Semites of Central Europe played during the Holocaust. In response to this version of the map, Stasiuk radically expanded Central Europe to the east and south (including Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Albania and former Yugoslav countries). Geographical extension resulted in the unveiling of the tragic past (war, the Holocaust), but allowed to express the dominant present problems (the state of post-colonial dependence).

Stasiuk's narratives were not stories about the whole, but about loose points on the map, between which the author drew links. In addition, the writer looks after the perspective of "ordinary man", so his travel stories take on a plebeian character. The collective hero portrayed by Stasiuk makes us aware that bypassing the problem of inequality not only prevents integration with the West, but also weakens or destroys internal ties between the communities of Central Europe. In the postmodernist burgher novel, the question of equality did not exist, so integration was criticized only for the lack of "beauty"; in the plebeian narrative, egalitarianism has grown to the supreme rank, because it turned out that integration with the Union strengthened inequalities, pushing to the vast margin of what was "ugly" (post-communism heritage, Central European participation in the Holocaust, Central European provincialism, poverty, pop-culture versions of nationalism).

After the bourgeois and plebeian narrative, next question appeared in Polish literature—about the chances of internal autonomy, i.e. the chances of belonging to the Union and the possibility of pursuing a policy independent of it. This kind of isolated integration poses a number of problems: the most-advanced idea, namely *Via Carpatia*, attempts to connect Central Europe with Southern Europe, not to expand the Union or to connect the distant areas better, but to weaken the Union. *Via Baltica*, in turn, emphasizes the need to strengthen the ties between Central Europe and Scandinavia. Finally, *Jacob's Books* of Tokarczuk point to a different criterion; according to this novel, Central Europe will be integrated internally and less dependent on the Union when it becomes an alien-friendly land. Such solidarity invalidates internal and external borders.

The discussed narratives turned out to be a kind of geo-poetics laboratory. The stories produced in the lab about joining Central Europe and the West have revealed that Central Europe (states, governments, societies) faces a dramatic choice between three values:

integration (with the European Union), autonomy (towards the Union), democracy. The problem is that you can choose only one value at the expense of losing the other two. Does this mean that Central Europe will soon leave the Union? Or that it will stay in the Union as an autonomous and authoritarian part of it? Both results are possible. But these questions and outcomes make us realize that the problems of Central Europe are similar to the problems of Italy or Great Britain. Brexit and strong anti-EU attitudes in Italy allow us to see in the literature about Central Europe the forecasts of the problems of the whole Union. When trouble gets worse, everyone will search for a narrative combining three values. Will politicians then read the literature of Central Europe?

Notes

- ¹ The major part of pages 3–5 dedicated to Stasiuks’s work has been translated from Polish into English by David Malcolm.
- ² Yurii Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkową*, Wołowiec: Czarne, 2000. References to this edition are given in the text.
- ³ The German plan for Central Europe—a modernizing and colonial one in relation to Poland, the Czech lands, and Slovakia—shatters the story about the development of the Middle as a result of the natural convergence of various societies. See Peszke (1989:125).
- ⁴ In this context, Tomas Venclova’s remark is telling (in a conversation with Jerzy Illg—“Dyktando Pana Boga.” In: *Res Publica* 1989, no. 2, p. 49). “Illg: How do you imagine the borders of the Central Europe? Venclova: I don’t know. It’s very hard to say. [...] *the borders are fluid. Some countries can from time to time fall out of it, and then return. In some sense, Russia in part belongs to it, in the person, let’s say, of Brodsky*” [emphasis mine—P.Cz.]. Thus, Venclova treats Central Europe as a voluntary union of states, and at the same time as a cultural unity created by individual figures. On this principle, some states can “from time to time fall out of it.” Russia, however, can “in some sense” belong to it, only when it is personified by Brodsky.
- ⁵ “Why is my radio, why are the newspapers I buy full of percentages, figures, balances, and accounts of meetings in which some wanted to extract as much as possible, and the others wanted to give as little as possible”—Stasiuk (2006: 68).
- ⁶ “Our homelands, our countries will vanish as spiritual, cultural points of reference. Poland will vanish, Italy will vanish, France will vanish. [...] It is very possible that in this way the West will at last link up with the East. The homelessness of spiritual emigrants will in the end become a shared home” Satsiuk (2006: 96–97).

- ⁷ This state of double disintegration was presented by Ziemowit Szczerek in the novel *Między morze. Podróżę przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę Środkową* ([Between-Seas.Travels through a real and imaginary Central Europe], 2017). The author has set the action in modern Central Europe (from the Baltic states to the Balkan Peninsula), diagnosing and plotting the future: 1) populist parties are coming to power in the Central Europe states, strengthening social frustrations and national pride; 2) new governments, legitimizing their power, take an anti-EU course; 3) the awakened nationalisms block the possibility of forming an alliance between the countries of Central Europe (these countries “with their nationalist resentments are unable to come to an agreement and will do nothing together”, 339); 4) isolation from the European Union in the name of better development will not bring improvement in everyday life, 5) Central Europe, conducting anti-EU and anti-liberal policies, will—like in the interwar period—evolve towards different variants of authoritarianism (“it always ended in the same way: a return to something like National Socialism”, 338).
- ⁸ I refer to the book: Rodrik (2011). The author recognized that in the present world there is a conflict between democracy, globalization and the autonomy of the state. The book proves that from the perspective of the state it is possible to reconcile only two of them (open to globalization and transnational democratic procedures undermine the autonomy of the state, while strengthening the autonomy of the state combined with democracy excludes participation in globalization). My reflections on Central Europe can be treated as a voice to Rodrik’s book leading to two conclusions: 1) literature radicalizes the trilemma, showing that post-communist countries can choose only one of three values; 2) if in today’s world problems from the semi-periphery and periphery are moving to the center, than Central Europe announces a problem that will soon affect the countries forming the core of Europe.

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**Territory, Identity and the Obstacle of Multiplicity.
Central European Narratives**

Przemysław Czapliński

The paper concerns Central Europe from the mid-1980s to the second decade of the 21st century. The central problems discussed in the paper are the variable concepts of the location of Central Europe towards the European Union. The first of these ideas took the form of assimilation—brilliantly suggested by Milan Kundera in his essay; the idea dominated thinking about Central Europe from the mid-1980s to the end of the accession process of the former communist states to the Union (2004). The concept of internal divisions—foreshadowed in works of Andrzej Stasiuk—is the second one; this idea, which meant the return of the imagery of nation states, began to gain importance at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and its effectiveness peaked in 2015, when Central European countries, not complying with common EU directives, refused to accept migrants from the South East. The third idea (approximately—second decade of 21st century), which can be called a separate integration, includes various activities for a stronger unification of the Central European countries as a separate region in the Union and as a strong political player. The key role is played by alternative narratives in relation to the previous order; these narratives can be seen both in literary works (e.g. Olga Tokarczuk) and in political and economic endeavors (Rail Baltica, Via Carpathia).