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Central Europe and its place within  
European space and history: (limited)  
homage to Oskar Halecki

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*Astract: The Article tries to cope with Central European macro-region, its history and inclusion of its legacy into broader European framework. Author elaborates famous theories of Central European and European history and its time lines and spatial borders presented in early 1950s by Polish historian working than in the USA Oskar Halecki. However author argues that Halecki's concepts are useful and bright-minded explanation of some structural problems of European history and placement of geographical and geopolitical "Center" within this framework, article challenges Halecki's concept and tries to point out some relatively hidden moments establishing Central European identity and its place in European general developments.*

*Keywords: European History, European Macro-Regions, Western Civilization, Central Europe*

Central (and even more Eastern or South-Eastern) Europe represents macro-region which development was shaped by almost the same processes as that of Western Europe but which is in the same time in some regards belated and backward variant of Western development (cf. e. g. Hroch, Klusáková 1996). Border position of Central Europe between Eastern and Western Europe (cf. Halecki 2000) shaped and limited specific course of Central European history. This means that we can excerpt inspiration form Western concepts, we can use them carefully but we must always bear in mind certain peculiarities of Central European development which should be considered by efforts for building of new scholar concepts and models.

This article deals with concept of Central Europe and its positioning on geo-historical map of Europe. Very interesting notion of Central Europe was presented by Polish historian Oskar Halecki some 50 years ago. His deep interest in macro-historical processes could bring inspiration and courage to ask such in fact meta-historical questions for meaning of centrality in the long course of history of "European epoch". His approach and his bright-minded insights into problems of Central European history thus helps as the basis for further considerations.

## 1. Borders of Europe and macro-regions of European history

It is relatively easy to mark European borders in the North when natural border of Arctic Sea and Arctic Ocean delimitates Russian and Scandinavian frontiers. On the other hand, Baltic Sea was never such a natural border line. It was more conceptualized as important European communication and it was seen as a center of important European region in the same time. Halecki's European community comprehends further Iceland, Ireland (although it is connected with Europe in fluent way through Great Britain). This implies that English Channel was never natural European border but it was more something like linkage of two European regions. Other integral parts of Europe - the Low Countries - were of big importance for development of European history too. France was in the same very central position in Europe as above mentioned Low Countries. More complicated are Spanish and Portuguese cases which were always influenced by some non-European notions and they were in Europe in pure geographical meaning till the end of *reconquista* but they were not part of European history in Halecki's assumption. Spain and Portugal became full-fledged part of European history at the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Mediterranean Sea became step by step southern border of Europe. This border line was however specific because it did not embody element dividing Europe from other continents but it was rather field of nested interests, ties, and relations connecting Europe with Africa and Asia.<sup>1</sup> South-eastern border of Europe was translated by expansion of Seldjuk and later Ottoman Turks. Ottoman Empire and its borders created at the same time southeastern borders of European community and its history.

If definition of northern, western, and even southern or south-eastern border of Europe was possible without extreme effort for European epoch of history, finding of eastern border is not query of that easy origin. It could be even said that determination of eastern border was always huge problem for

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<sup>1</sup> Halecki points at *Imperium Romanum*, Arabic expansion, Byzantine efforts, Crusades, or French colonization of Maghreb and Northern Africa.

someone dealing with European history. Halecki pointed in this context above all at the fact that establishment of the eastern border always faced problem of positioning of cultural-civilization belonging of Russia. According to Halecki, Russia was always parted at European and Asian part which nevertheless were not defined in strictly geographic terms and which can not be separated by purely geographical way of thinking (cf. Halecki 2000: 88-89). Halecki argued against *a priori* exclusion of Orthodox nations from European context<sup>2</sup> and his arguments were based on deep knowledge of Russian historical and political thinking and works devoted to question of Russian relation to Europe (including Masaryk's book *Russia and Europe*). He pointed further at the fact that Kiev Russia was integral part of centuries-long process of creation of Europe.

Old Kiev Russian state was however something really different of later Russian Empire. Anti-European accents were brought into Russia after Mongolian attacks which had catastrophic outcome for Kiev state. Cultural-civilization border of Europe shifted at least to eastern border of Polish-Lithuanian state after catholicization of Lithuania in 1387. New wave of Europeanization was emerging in Russia during Peter the Great's rule; it was of course only superficial. More over, this wave was related in time with power reorientation of Russian imperialistic policy westwards. Russia first started to rule Ukraine and Baltic countries, it occupied parts of Poland and Finland later and doing this it entered European power politics.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, Russia was more European during the 19<sup>th</sup> century than ever before thanks to this. On the contrary, communist Russia was „*certainly non-European formation, not if even anti-European one*“ (Halecki 2000: 101).

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<sup>2</sup> Last but not least because existence of the Greeks whose European identity is un-doubtful.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Béhar conceptualized Russian expansion to image of so-called circles. He exploited this idea in the way that the first circle of Russian expansion comprehended Siberia and former Tatar lands, the second circle was Belarus and Ukraine, the third circle consisted of Turkish-Mongolian lands towards Caspian Sea. Last circle consisted of countries occupied by Soviet Union during the 1940s and countries controlled by Soviet Union after WW 2.

It means that western border of Soviet Russia and later USSR embodied in the same time eastern border of Europe.

Halecki defined two macro-regions in Europe: the Western Europe and the Eastern Europe. Conversion between them is gradual; and the conversion is actually composed of two regions of Central Europe. Nevertheless, Halecki assumed that Eastern Europe is full fledged integral part of European community thus it is integral part of European epoch in history. Meanwhile Western Europe was characterized by political difference matched together with cultural unity, the same could not be said concerning Eastern Europe because the East was divided both in political and cultural terms: orthodox nations share Eastern European space together with Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, or even Magyars according to Halecki's point of view. Three separated territorial units thus emerged in Eastern Europe. South-East was ruled by Byzantine Empire and completed by Slavic states of the Balkans. This part ceased to be component of European community since Ottoman occupation till the end of WW 1. The second part was created by Danube region which is embodied above all by Hungarian Kingdom and which was under strong influence (but not always under straight control) of the Habsburg dynasty. Finally, there is the third region, so-called North-Eastern Europe which consists of Polish-Lithuanian Union and Russia.

## **2. Central Europe – one or two regions?**

Above mentioned theoretical spatial division of European history and that of Eastern Europe lead Halecki towards reconsider deeper differentiation of macro-regions of European development. Central Europe played the key role in the framework of an attempt to cover macro-regional structuring of gradual conversion between European East and European West. Halecki stressed above all relativity of any territorial definition of Central Europe which was and is always depending on particular geopolitical position of those who define (cf. for example contradictory notions of so-called *Mitteleuropa* and East-Central Europe under Soviet control).

Halecki however acknowledged important role of German factor in the process of shaping of Central Europe. He supposed that level of German influence is in the same time border line among the regions which he labels as two Central Europes (cf. Halecki 2000: 121-136). Moreover, the definition of two regions inside/of Central Europe forced him to reassessment of general image of macro-regional division of European continent: Western and Eastern Europe are supplemented by two Central Europes.

First Central Europe is in fact the same as territories that once belonged to the Holy Empire of German Nation. This means today's Germany, Northern Italy and some parts of former Habsburg Monarchy. The most complicated problem within this concept in effort for mutual delimitation of both Central European regions according to Halecki is to postulate which countries of former Habsburg Monarchy belonged to this part of Central Europe and which to the other part. He acknowledged as assured however that only Austria remained in this "more-western-like" part of Central Europe together with Germany after 1945, meanwhile other countries – heirs of the Habsburg Monarchy – definitely shifted to its Eastern part.

East-Central Europe (it means the Eastern part of Central Europe) subsumed according to Halecki Poland as key regional power, further lands of Apostolic Hungarian Crown, lands of Czech Crown, Baltic states (Finland included) and partially (and only till Russian occupation) also territory of Ukraine and Belarus. The main paradox of East-Central Europe was in Halecki's assumption the cultural one. Many of these countries have had very close cultural and political ties with the West and only German and Russian pressures repositioned these states more eastwards in geopolitical and geo-cultural terms.

Halecki's concept of *Eas-Central Europe* was relatively quickly positively acknowledged by Anglo-Saxon historiography and political science and it spread very fast from this influent source to other countries and scientific communities. Let us have look only to Germany to put clear example. German scholars started to elaborate notion of *Ostmitteleuropa* to cover group of (post)communist countries in Central Europe instead of

classical *Mitteleuropa* or more “political correct” but a bit like neologism sounding *Zentraleuropa*. It is interesting prove of certain attractive force of this concept that even many of Central European authors adopted this scheme, most of all people who write for English speaking audience (*pars pro toto* Attila Ágh – Ágh 1998). It is nevertheless clear that this conceptualization corresponds only with very short period of history of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when all this group of very divergent countries belonged to the Soviet rule sphere.

Main reason of this – at least from the Czech point of view – non-standard geo-historical stratification of Europe consists unambiguously in fact that Oskar Halecki oriented his approach according to Polish geopolitical positioning of Central Europe. As once Norman Davis remarked, there were and are different definition of Poland but it is clear that Poland was always close to European East. Many Polish would have serious problems to place Poland to such Central Europe that would be ruled by Germans and Austrians, the same as to be ranked as part of Europe ruled by Mongolians, Muscovites and Moslems (cf. Davies 1986).

The problem is in fact that not all parts of Polish state belonged to the same macro-regions within Central Europe, especially after definitive collapse of Poland in 1795. Center of political gravitation of Polish state – which was embodied by so-called Congress-Kingdom after the Congress in Vienna and this center – was (excluding still dominant cultural patterns) in the East, in the same geopolitical direction as former Polish-Lithuanian Union. On the other hand, German Empire influence reached in long term perspective to most of lands inhabited by Western Slavic People, to Hungary, and to part of territory inhabited by Southern Slavic People thanks to existence of the Habsburg Monarchy which entered stadium of elementary consolidation during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Evans 1984). Czech lands and territories of Slovenes and partially those of Croats were un-doubtful integral parts of German dominated half of the Habsburg Empire. Hungary showed in its Magyar ethnic core more “West-Central” than “East-Central” influences too. As the work of Magyar historian Jenő Szücs (Szücs 2001) explains, there were deep structural similarities between

Hungary, Czech Lands, and Poland considering economy, political, and societal system already in medieval times. These specifics defined above mentioned states not only in comparison to Western Europe but even more in comparison to Eastern Europe. Thus image of Central Europe quite different from Halecki's one was created.

Above presented arguments are not designed for total negation of all moments of Halecki's concept of two regions within Central Europe. His basic idea that Central Europe is *only* buffer zone between West and East is not fully adequate. The problem is that this idea implies full dependence of Central Europe either on Germans or on Russians and doing this it underestimates originality and activity of the mere Central Europe.

More realistic picture could start at description of core of Central Europe, from recognition of its specific developmental and structural features and it should later differentiate contacts between particular parts of Central Europe, Germany, and Russia. These contacts should be interpreted in mutual connected terms of cooperation and conflict<sup>4</sup> than as mere description of power politics of both strong neighboring nations of Central Europe. It may be that even such understanding would conclude again by recognition of two Central Europes but there would be more complicated reasons behind it, frontiers would go different ways and general image would take more into account historical changes of the role of Central European macro-region in general European history.

### **3. "Habsburg framework" of Central European politics**

We can not ignore short excursion to the issue of what exactly is meant as Central Europe for the purposes of this paper following many other works devoted to the traditions and developments of Central European affairs. Central European agenda which is latent present since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Miller 1999) raised attraction at the end of the 1980s

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<sup>4</sup> Using famous words of Czech historian and politician of the 19<sup>th</sup> century František Palacký: „stýkání a potýkání“.

when the concept of Central Europe replaced prevailing Western concept of East-Central (or simply Eastern) Europe. Special conceptualization of Central Europe as something exceptional in comparison both to East and West is undisputable. Historical differences in political, economic, and social structures of three European macro-regions have been documented carefully (cf. Halecki 2000; Szücs 2001; Berend, Ránki 1974 etc.), so we can presuppose that there really exists something like Central Europe regardless from opposite positions (cf. e. g. Peter 1999).

Less clear are its borders. There are at least three general accepted notions of Central Europe (Maier 1992):

(1) The German notion presented by Friedrich Naumann identifying Central Europe with space controlled by economic power and political hegemony of German Empire (which for example means that even Belgium should be included).

(2) The dissent notion of Central Europe as clear opposition to Soviet Union and thus differentiating countries of communist block (cf. Konstantinović 1994).

(3) The historical Austrian/Habsburg notion of Central Europe composed from nations ruled by Habsburg dynasty. This brief survey shows that notion of Central Europe has its geographical, historical, political<sup>5</sup>, and deep symbolical meaning (cf. Kontler 1999).

The key question of our research is the question of political framework of development of Central European nations, the question of heritage of this framework in given territory in regard to rise of modern mass politics. The most important problem of Central European development was that the period of outbreak and rise mass politics preceded or went hand in hand

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of Central Europe and *Mitteleuropa* became for example crucial cleavage of Czech-German relations in the past (cf. Bugge 1999).

with state and nation building processes. Logical historical sequence of these processes (state-building – nation-building – opening of mass politics – cf. Rokkan 1999; Rokkan 1975; Tilly 1993) could not be followed thanks to the existence of the Habsburg Empire and parallel existing and welling up peripheral protests of subordinated nations (cf. Hloušek 2002).

Aforementioned leads to conclusion that reference framework of Central Europe will be territory controlled by Habsburg Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Concluding remarks**

The question of definition of proper framework of Central Europe is not an end in itself. It is important for judging specific features of this region in comparison to both West and East and it is even more important for definition of something that could be labeled as joined Central European historical experience. This experience could be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD when Central European nations opted for Western variant of Christianity. This was crucial moment which meant that Central European nations experienced the same cultural development as European West and in the same time it was something that divided Center of Europe from the orthodox East. Geopolitical position was on the contrary more in favor of Eastern power influence. Once somewhat tight but certainly not unbearable shield of the Habsburg Monarchy disappeared, the way was paved for power struggle over Central European states. Temporal winner of this struggle was Germany but much deeper influence left 40 years of Soviet predominance.

May be this a bit strange political-cultural mixture could be the core of specific Central European identity. Now it is important to match this identity with more general European one without losing positive elements of Central European historical experience on one hand and without closing door to new ideas coming from the West.

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