

Reframing Central Europe: A Prologue to the Hungarian edition of *Mitteleuropa Revisited*

This book, that readers can finally hold in their hands, is not without antecedents.

As early as in 1986, authors Emil Brix and Erhard Busek published another volume under the title *Projekt Mitteleuropa*, the fruit of an era of optimism. In this period the political arena began to reflect the impacts of Gorbachev's reforms, and the winds of the new *détente* swept through the Central European region of the Soviet Empire. "Central Europe" was increasingly used as an umbrella term, an intellectual framework for cross-border cultural fermentation and political solidarity, driven and filled with appeal by the desire and promise of overcoming existing regimes. Many of its actors, from István Borsody through Milan Kundera and lecturers involved in Hungary's college movement to György Konrád, pondered upon the old and new meanings of this term. For the artists and revolting intellectuals of this region, Central Europe meant a common home and community in an alien world that had been imposed on them.

Actually, "Central Europe" was a concept transcending systems, detachment from everything that connoted the "East" (the Soviet Union, despotism, the Gulag, servile subordination, etc.): it took us a step closer to an imagined West, designated then simply as "Europe" by many. This notion had been associated with others, it became closely linked to the concept and practice of a civil society that can spread through networks and transcend national borders. The success of Polish Solidarność also gave rise to realistic alternatives of social organization in the form of workers' self-governance, grassroots self-organization and efficient social self-reliance. With support from the joint Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) and Soros Foundation, Iván Bába and myself could set up a Central Europe research group, working in 1988 and 1989 with a range of promising young scholars, most of whom have drifted into mainstream politics in the course of events that followed but undeniably experienced this new kind of discourse.

The appeal of the Central Europe discourse came to an end when Central European small states joined Euro-Atlantic processes and institutions. Seemingly, this region had reached its haven, we believed that European integration could ease our centuries of calamities and abolish backwardness.

The optimism of the 1980s vanished without a trace in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The utopia of global cooperation and a common European home was displaced by a series of dystopias and emergency scenarios in recent years. Hence, it is even more remarkable that the authors of this book, retaining their conviction and ardour, argue that Central Europe has remained or, in fact, it can become the host region of hope.

However, they can obviously perceive the problem: European integration is currently going through the deepest crisis of its history, since the effort to overcome divisions within Europe has failed so much as to really threaten with a final split into two blocs.

Nevertheless, the authors believe that there is still hope and that this hope is now Central Europe. They carefully and convincingly argue that the future of Europe will be determined in this region, to which they ascribe a broader meaning, due to the deeper sense of reality, cultural heritage and problem-solving skills of the societies inhabiting Central Europe.

The institutional and political strengthening of the Central European region and its efficient cooperation within the framework of the Visegrád Group (V4) have really added a new colour to the palette of European politics. The authors of this volume are straightforward in expressing their opinion about this issue: in a configuration of V4+2, complete with Austria and Slovenia, we would have a greater chance to convince the Western part of Europe that the “Mitteleuropa” now squeezed between Germany and Russia and treated as an inferior can act as a new jumpstart for the sluggish European integration.

Seeing so much optimism, some people may shake their heads. They can find this book particularly intriguing, since the authors reach this conclusion despite the fact that they are fully aware of the troubles, ambiguities, or sometimes even absurdities, of our past and present. Yet this book was not written by Eastern European dreamers but two original thinkers from Vienna, who incorporated many decades of experience gained in the fields of state administration, diplomacy, cultural mediation and regional policy in a brilliantly written, highly readable and very convincing text. Their commitment to European integration and its rescue is as unquestionable as the Central European diversity and creativity that characterizes their thinking. The Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (Institut für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa) they lead is an exemplar of how a relatively small institution can operate with high efficiency and significant scope.

The in-depth knowledge of the cultural diversity, crisis management skills, spiritual and artistic creativity of Central Europe allows the authors to present proposals that encourage us to think and act, thus they can have a liberating effect on our imagination fettered by the bleak reality of technocratic and bureaucratic projects.

This book can benefit all European citizens of Hungary, but it carries a real strong message especially for the younger generations: only a thorough knowledge of our entangled histories and cultures, the understanding of and respect for the values, religions and goals of our “neighbours” can provide us chances to find the soul of Europe and, despite our differences, try to understand our belonging together again. The publisher, iASK aims to ensure that our volume will reach these young people.