

Andrea Bölcskei

Central Europe as a historical, cultural, social and geopolitical concept today*

1. Where is Central Europe?

In recent decades, *Central Europe* has undoubtedly again become a fashionable term. Politicians are eager to form geopolitical, economic or cultural alliances (e.g. Central European Initiative, Visegrad Group, Centrope, Central European Free Trade Agreement, Slavkov Agreement, Inicjatywa Trójmorza¹) to boost the cooperation of some or several countries of the region in strategically important fields (e.g. environmental protection, energetic, military policy and business development; know-how; commercial, logistical, social, cultural, educational and sporting issues). Non-governmental organizations have been established to discuss common affairs (e.g. Middleeuropean Initiative conferences on youth employment, migration, etc.); the media broadcasts business, sports, celebrity news and features items on a regional basis (e.g. Central Europe | Euronews; Central Europe – EURACTIV; Central Europe | Economist; Central Europe News; Central European Media Enterprises; Global Tenders – Procurement News from Central Europe); higher education offers various programs on Central European Studies (e.g. the MA and PhD programs at the Central European University, Budapest; the Central European Studies Programs at Karoli and Corvinus Universities, Budapest; at Charles University and FAMU, Prague; at Palacky University, Olomouc; at Masaryk University, Brno; etc.). The image of Central Europe appears in popular culture (e.g. the 2014 movie “The Grand Budapest Hotel”). While, the deprivation of the recognition of being a Central European can trigger negative feelings in the inhabitants of the region in everyday situations. Furthermore, several recent essays, scholarly studies have been devoted to exploring and explaining the essence of the ever-changing concept of Central Europe (see below).

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One of the major concerns of relevant literature so far has been to determine which countries were accepted as Central European states in different historical periods. Concepts of Central Europe drawn up by outstanding geographers, historians and political scientists in the 20th century included not only Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, but in some cases also most of the Balkans, the Baltic lands, Denmark, France, northern Italy, the Low Countries and Switzerland (OKEY 1992: 102–106, 127). LONNIE R. JOHNSON (1996: 11–12) differentiated between East Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia) and West Central Europe (Austria, Germany).

In today's reality, PETER JORDAN (2005) accepts a wide concept of Central Europe as a political region, consisting of Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland; and including also the northeast part of Italy, Vojvodina in Serbia, the Partium and Transylvania proper in Romania, Bukovina, Galicia, the Zakarpattia Oblast in Ukraine, the Kaliningrad Exclave of Russia, a small part of Belarus and, from certain aspects, the southern edge of Denmark, an eastern part of the Netherlands, parts of Belgium, Alsace and a part of Lorraine in France, when the term is used for a cultural region. In his understanding, the boundaries of Central Europe as a cultural region do not always follow the political borders of today's Central European states.

According to PAUL WOODMAN (2018: 216), “the spatial manifestation of Central Europe is more to do with nodes, gradations and liminal space”, Prague, Kraków, Budapest and Vienna being the most influential nodes, Berlin, Warsaw, Braşov and Ljubljana being secondary nodes in the region. In a recent study (HARDI ed. 2015: 132–151), university students from postsocialist countries were ready to accept Central Europe as a small, politically uninfluenced region comprising the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, occasionally also Poland and/or Slovenia; however, according to Austrian students' narrower understanding, the core countries of Central Europe are Germany and their homeland.

2. What defines Central Europe?

Experts generally share the view that Central Europe is basically a culturally-historically-socially-geopolitically motivated mental construct, whose physical boundaries are blurred and prone to change over time (KUNDERA 1984, JOHNSON 1996: 4). However, certain observations about its geography can be made. Its essential, core area is landlocked, approximately the territory of today's Austria and the Czech Republic (JORDAN 2005, HARDI 2015: 99, WOODMAN 2018). The landscape is fragmented, scattered with mountains, basins and river



valleys, making it an ideal living space for small, distinct groups of people (OKEY 1992: 105).

Historically, the origins of Central Europe are often traced to the southward spread of the Teuton tribes from their homeland in the Jutland peninsula, wedging in between the Roman Empire and the territory of the Slavic tribes (KOSSMANN 1950, quoted by HARDI 2015: 93–94). The geopolitical importance of the region was reinforced by the distinct political-religious-social-economic development in the West and East after the split of the Roman Empire (JOHNSON 1996: 3–12, JORDAN 2005: 165–167, HARDI 2015: 96). In the integrating European marketplace, Central Europe became an extensive grain-producing zone supplying England and the Western coast, which functioned as economic centres (TELEKI 1936, quoted by HARDI 2015: 95).

Some authors argue that unfortunate historical structures and, as a result, the long-enduring presence of social tensions are the chief commonalities in the pasts of the Central European countries. In this view, a crucial element behind the less successful modernization of the countries in the region is the “early modern mix of east European serfdom and western-derived noble constitutionalism” (OKEY 1992, quotation from p. 131; JORDAN 2005: 165–167, HAMES–PORTUGES 2013: 5). Another influential factor in the shared history of the region is ideological, political, social and cultural oppression between 1945 and 1989, which is sometimes identified as an example of “secondary colonialism” (ZELENKA 2013: 18). The typically Central European ideas that distant past events irrecoverably determine (and explain) the present, and that the resistance of small nations to larger neighbouring ones is doomed to fail are usually said to be based on such historical experiences (JOHNSON 1996: 3–12).

Geopolitically, Central Europe is an area between Germany and Russia, a potential sphere of influence for the two great powers. Attempts to exert political and economic influence are sometimes accompanied by overt or covert territorial claims from the part of the rivals. In times of crisis, multiethnic Central Europe transforms into a supranational bond, as its unity guarantees at least some degree of self-protection against the powerful neighbours. Central Europe, however, is not only a buffer zone of conflicting interests, but also a stabilizer. Incorporating elements from both German and Slavic culture, it actively plays Pan-Germanic and Pan-Slavic aspirations against each other, thus evolving into a politically neutral space (cf. T. G. MASARYK’s plans of the Democratic Union of Central Europe in 1918; ZELENKA 2013: 22, 24, HARDI 2015: 97, 103, 106).

For most Central Europeans, the geopolitically determined ‘in-between’ experience brings forward an interesting duality. It builds, on the one hand, the feeling of deviation from the admired centre (regardless of whether this



happens to be the West or Russia at a given time), and, on the other hand, the possibility to find their own ways in the world creatively. In the shadow of the great, foreign political powers, the small nations of Central Europe are forced to consciously shape and consolidate their cultural identities to survive (NUMANO 2007: 125–126, 128).

Culturally, Central Europe declares itself a part of Western Europe and rejects Russia's values, considering them as much (or more) Asian as (than) European. Consequently, Central Europe sometimes sees itself in a missionary position as the easternmost guard of Western civilization against the foreign, barbaric East. The West does not necessarily share this view. As the small nations of Central Europe, because of their scarce resources, were mostly observers rather than initiators in world history, they have remained on the periphery of the Western horizon. At times the powerful West explicitly abandoned them (KUNDERA 1984: 8, 11, ZELENKA 2013: 16, HARDI 2015: 98). As emphasising Central European identity often means rejecting associations with the East, some Western thinkers have gone so far as to mock the idea of Central Europe and simply consider it a projection of dreams to be acknowledged as a fully integral part of Western Europe (WAGNER 2003, quoted in HARDI 2015: 98–99).

Central Europe is undoubtedly in the intersection of the zones of influence of great cultural and religious centres, a space where Western and Eastern values can intermingle, creating a unique internal variety. In this scenario, Central Europe is a mediator between the West and East, a region where cultural-political and occasional linguistic convergence is more a result of neighbourhood than genetic relations between nations (KUNDERA 1984: 8, ZELENKA 2013: 14, 20–22, HARDI 2015: 92, 95, 104, 108).

The cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic diversity in Central Europe is a source of energy, dynamism and that of conflict as well (HAMES–PORTUGES 2013: 2, HARDI 2015: 99). The division of the region into small states, where national and state boundaries do not always coincide, leads to clashes of interests that impede cooperation (OKEY 1992: 105, 109, REY–GROZA 2009: 265, quoted by HARDI 2016: 133). The tripartite Polish–Danubian–Balkan division and the presence of Hungarians as cultural outsiders amidst the German and Slavic population only complicate the situation further (OKEY 1992: 105, ZELENKA 2013: 17). From time to time, constituent parts demand recognition for themselves, which inevitably results in disruption (ZELENKA 2013: 21). Internal disintegration must have played a crucial role in the fact that external influences could always be strong in Central Europe at the expense of interior cohesive forces (REY–GROZA 2009: 265, quoted by HARDI 2016: 133).



What NUMANO (2007: 132–133) calls “the small-nation complex” of Central European peoples in fact brings the regional opposing forces into play:

patriotism and nationalism, on the one hand, for effective self-identification and small-scale self-protection, and the appreciation and incorporation of different cultures accumulated in the area, on the other, for creating a cross-border multicultural space, in which the ethnically different nations can co-exist (ZELENKA 2013: 22). Maintaining this invigorating cultural variety and interaction in the homogenizing global world of American mass culture is a real challenge for present day Central Europe (HAMES–PORTUGES 2013: 4). In its diversity, Central Europe is sometimes also interpreted as a miniature Europe, whose fate predicts the destiny of Europe well in advance (KUNDERA 1984: 8).

In mentality, scepticism, irony and mocking superiority are claimed to be typical Central European intellectual values (KUNDERA 1984: 8, OKEY 1992: 127). A cyclic perception of time, the feeling of discontinuity and distrust in history are the results of interpreting the past of the nation as a sequence of tragic events that constantly stalled steady development (REY–GROZA 2009: 265, quoted by HARDI 2016: 133). In the arts, grotesque and satire seem to be very much adequate and popular approaches to comment on Central European reality (ZELENKA 2013: 14). The era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after 1867 is often idealized in works of art and in people's minds because of its assumed liberalism and ethnic-religious tolerance (ZELENKA 2013: 17). Places with different names in different languages, conflicts over the use of endonymic and exonymic toponym variants and ideologically motivated place-name changes are also regarded “quintessentially Central European” (WOODMAN 2018: 216, 226).

Central Europe is often defined as distinct groups of people gathering together in always varying combinations to deal with their common situations, problems and shared traditions (KUNDERA 1984: 7). Fusion and disintegration seem to be key survival strategies in the region (OKEY 1992: 105). Today's Central Europe lacks some of the most essential characteristics of its traditional version: the strong Jewish influence has disappeared; Austria no longer wants to be the central leader state of the region; Germany has withdrawn from Central Europe to join the West and helps Central European countries from a distance in their attempts to adjust themselves to Western Europe. Still, Central Europe has successfully reinvented itself, as required by the current flow of events, to provide a sustainable living space for its present inhabitants (OKEY 1992: 133, JORDAN 2005: 165–167, HARDI 2015: 107–108, WOODMAN 2018).

3. What does the toponym *Central Europe* mean today?

Cognitive linguists claim that words convey conceptual meanings, which are construed by speakers in an active manner. In the case of a proper name, for instance, the salient characteristics of the indicated denotatum (the real-



world entity) are observed, then, by way of abstraction, schematization and categorisation based on prototypicality, these are assembled into cognitive domains (mental boxes) to store them in the mind. The complex matrix of these cognitive domains constitutes the meaning of the name. This meaning is conventionally represented by a sound sequence, a name form in the language. This explanation entails the idea that meaning comprises elements of encyclopaedic as well as linguistic knowledge.

Considering the ever-changing meaning of the toponym *Central Europe*, the question of which cognitive domains and in what proportion play an important role in the present day understanding of the term arises. My first assumption is that domains such as COUNTRIES, LANDSCAPE, GEOPOLITICAL POSITION, POLITICAL ORIENTATION, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, POPULATION DENSITY, SOCIETY, NATIONALITIES, LANGUAGES, MENTALITY, TRADITIONS, VALUES, RELIGIONS, EDUCATION, AGRICULTURE, INDUSTRY, ECONOMY, BUSINESS, CURRENCY, COMMERCE, TRANSPORTATION, TOURISM, HISTORICAL EVENTS, CULTURE, ARTS, ARCHITECTURE, CUISINE, SPORTS, TIME ZONE, CENTRES, PLACE NAMES will appear either at the centre or on the periphery of the term's meaning. My second assumption is that the centrality and the actual contents of these domains are largely dependent on personal experiences. Proofs for or against these assumptions were sought in an online questionnaire involving 73 volunteering respondents from different parts of the world.

3.1. The first section of the questionnaire surveyed the relevant sociological standards of the participants (age, highest level of qualification, sex, country of residence). Almost three-quarters of the respondents (74%) were under 30 and a quarter of them (26%) were between 30 and 70. 58% of the participants took or are taking part in training in higher education, 42% of them indicated secondary school as the highest level of their qualifications. The ratio of women to men among the respondents was approximately 3:1. Almost half of the participants (52%) live in Hungary, the other half of them (48%) are from five different countries (Poland, the USA, Great Britain, Bulgaria and China). Thus, respondents are somewhat uniform concerning age and sex; and more balanced with respect to qualification and the country of residence, especially if Hungarian and foreign data are compared. As participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, the survey could not produce representative data; moreover, the sample is relatively small. Despite this, the results as well as the answers as qualitative material are expressive.

3.2. The second batch of questions was meant to detect which countries were spontaneously considered Central European countries by the respondents and what personal experiences, preferences or refusals might be in the background of their judgments. To the question "Which Central European countries have you been to?", apart from the conventionally accepted Central European states



(Austria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), references to Switzerland, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, the Ukraine, but also to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia could be found in responses by non-Hungarian participants; and Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Romania, Serbia, the Ukraine, more surprisingly, Belgium, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and France appeared in replies by Hungarian informants. One Hungarian respondent, however, “would consider Austria rather a Western country” (R 18).² The purpose of the participants’ stay in these countries was mostly leisure (69%); some also mentioned education (7%), business (4%), wedding, marriage (3%), conference (1%), multiple reasons (8%), travelling through (1%); only few people have never been to the region (3%), or were not willing to provide data (4%).

With respect to preferences of travel destinations, among non-Hungarian respondents, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria, in this order, were indicated most often as desired Central European destinations; then Poland, Slovenia and Switzerland shared an equal number of votes. Slovakia, Germany and some other countries seemed less attractive. Family relations, friends, previous visits, studying the country’s language, nature, culture, architecture, food, safety, cities of historic value, thermal pools and the classic ‘Central European’ experience were mentioned among reasons for a visit. Hungarian respondents preferred visiting Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Romania (especially Transylvania) and Austria; because of friends, culture, the language, historic cities, nature, coastal beaches and good beers, among others.

Rejection of visiting certain Central European countries was not a typical attitude among non-Hungarian respondents. Almost 40% of them emphasised that they had no negative connotations about any of the states in Central Europe. Some degree of refusal could be observed in connection with Slovenia, Slovakia, Serbia, Germany and the Czech Republic though; unfriendly people, poverty, poor conditions, political unrest, lack of safety, little knowledge about the country were among the main reasons expressed. Two extreme opinions are reflected in these two answers: “I would honestly love to visit all of them” (R 5), and “No desire to visit any of the countries” (R 7). Almost 30% of the Hungarian respondents claimed that they were willing to visit any Central European countries. Others were biased against the Ukraine, Slovakia, Serbia, Romania and Slovenia, because of the language, bad weather, lack of safety, poverty or previous bad experiences. One of the informants restricted the concept of Central Europe to their home country: “Hungary is the only Central European country” (R 27).

² Henceforth, R stands for “respondent”, followed by an identification number, whenever a specific data or a direct quotation is given from the survey.



3.3. The third section of the questionnaire focused primarily on conscious categorization: respondents were required to decide about 35 countries whether they belong to a given region of Europe or not. The list of 35 countries was the same in all four questions, and the tested regions included Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Southeast Europe and East Central Europe. Once continuing to the following question respondents could not return to the previous one.

The firmest judgements were made in connection with Central European countries. Six states were considered to belong to this region by more than three-fourths of the respondents: Slovakia (97,3%), Hungary (94,5%), the Czech Republic (93,2%), Slovenia (83,6%), Austria (79,5%) and Poland (75,3%). Eastern Europe was less precisely defined. Except for a single state, countries with the most votes were held Eastern European by half to three-quarters of the respondents: the Ukraine (89,0%), Russia (76,7%), Belarus (65,8%), Romania (57,5%), Moldova and Latvia (53,4%), Lithuania (52,1%) and Bulgaria (50,7%). Southeast Europe seems to be an even slightly vaguer concept than Eastern Europe. Six countries were indicated as parts of the region by half to two-thirds of the respondents: Macedonia (64,4%), Montenegro (64,4%), Bulgaria (63,0%), Albania (56,2%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (54,8%) and Greece (52,1%). East Central Europe proved to be the least clear-cut concept. Countries with the most votes were identified as East Central European states by only a third to half of the respondents: Hungary (52,1%), Poland (46,6%), Slovakia (43,8%), Romania (41,1%), the Ukraine (39,7%) and the Czech Republic (30,1%).

3.4. In Cognitive Linguistics, as quoted above, the conceptual meaning of a name is understood as the collection of elements of knowledge about the indicated entity and about the use of the name form in the language. Section four in the questionnaire focused on the use of the toponym *Central Europe*. Many respondents, mostly the Europeans, claimed that they “sometimes” (45%) or even “frequently” (33%) met the term *Central Europe* in everyday life. Others, especially US citizens, understandably felt less exposed to it and usually chose “never” (3%) or “rarely” (19%) to describe how often the term was used in their interactions. Those who were familiar with the observed toponym usually knew it from various sources (48%), mostly from history and geography classes (24%) and from the media (24%), but the arts, politics and professional work also appeared as sources of knowledge.

3.5. Section five was intended to elicit what respondents know or believe to know about the referent of the toponym *Central Europe* and how this knowledge is stored in the presupposed cognitive domains. Informants were asked to choose or complete statements about present day Central European countries. Completing the statements gave the respondents the opportunity to



express personal views; furthermore, as replying was optional in this case, the number of the reactions to a statement may also be indicative concerning the relevance of the tested domain in the conceptualization of the toponym under discussion.

Central Europe as a region with respect to LANDSCAPE was described by the respondents as an elevated, landlocked piece of land dominated by mountains, hills and plateaus and lacking in shoreline features (61,7%). The region was pictured as moderately or highly developed when HUMAN DEVELOPMENT was concerned (90,4%), with medium or high POPULATION DENSITY (94,5%). The GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS of Central European countries were believed to be represented mainly by the Central European Initiative and the Visegrad Group (94,5%).

In the HISTORY of Central Europe, most respondents highlighted the importance of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the experience of wars, exposure to communism, division by the Iron Curtain, the presence of nationalism, the recent reorientation towards the West; shortly, informants attributed “a chequered history that has encountered many challenges” (R 52) to the region (42 responses).

CULTURE in Central Europe was described by most respondents as diverse, traditional, rich in folk heritage, West-oriented, with strong Slavic and Germanic influences. Central Europe was depicted as a region where “[c]enturies of migration created a very eclectic cultural orientation” (R 7), the dominant trait of which today is “Western culture with remnants of communist heritage” (R 60) (39 responses).

When RELIGION is concerned, most respondents agreed that Central Europe is a Christian territory, where Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy meet and mingle with Protestantism; other religions, however, play a less significant role. The importance of religion in contemporary society was deemed somewhat ambivalent by Central Europeans themselves: an informant observed “[d]ecreasing popularity of all religions, but mainly Christian” faith (R 17); another participant judged the region “relatively religious compared to highly developed countries like Japan or the UK” (R 46) (50 responses).

According to most respondents, EDUCATION is conventionally of high quality in the region, although it is getting worse, partly due to its unstructured arrangement and partly because of financial struggles in the institutions. However, education in Central Europe is cheap and accessible for students. The traditional, Prussian model of education, still in use in the region, was criticised by some Hungarian informants because “it is too fact oriented” (R 49) and “[n]ot particularly useful in terms of developing one’s competences” (R 28) (42 responses).



With respect to INTERNAL POLITICS, most respondents emphasised the lack of stability, the presence of corruption, opportunism and devolution, the increase of nationalism and the shortage of strongly founded democratic institutions in the region. In a wider context, Central Europe was characterised by “strong leader-oriented political systems, [in which the] legacy of Communism can still be felt, [as the territory] lies in the crossfire of Western European/USA and Easter European/Asian political goals” (R 46) (41 responses).

Affairs in FOREIGN POLITICS were not judged more positively by most informants either. The importance of relations with the EU, Russia and the USA, a tendency for European integration, but also politics of isolation, immigration debates, subordinacy, increased suspicion of other countries were mentioned among current trends. Foreign affairs seem to be dependent on a sensitive balance between “[i]solation vs. engagement with external alliances [...] [r]egional vs. global engagement” (R 53) (34 responses).

MILITARY DEFENCE was not appreciated much either. Most respondents labelled it as weak, insignificant, dependent on western allies in NATO; according to a foreign informant “[a]chieving balance between defence against cross-border terrorism and defence against regional hegemony” (R 53) is a major challenge in the field (37 responses).

ECONOMY in Central Europe, as most respondents perceived it, is too much under the influence of the Western nations and Russia; it is developing, but is still unstable, obsolete, badly managed and very different across the region, from middle to high efficiency. The strongest critique came from a Hungarian informant: Central European countries are the “laggards of the EU” (R 16) (34 responses).

Most respondents saw AGRICULTURE in Central Europe in a fairly positive light. They described it significant, intensive and highly efficient, producing a lot of export goods. National resources, e.g. soil of great quality, are available, but there is a need for EU subsidies to cover the costs of farming. Praise and some criticism could equally be observed in the responses: “[a]ttention to organic sustainability and local access to locally produced goods” (R 53) was thought to be as much a characteristic feature of Central European agriculture as the “[c]oncentration of land in a few hands (feudalism)” (R 7) (35 responses).

INDUSTRY was considered by most respondents moderately developed, improving and westernizing, related mostly to food processing and raw materials, and varied in efficiency within the region. Some new trends such as reindustrialisation, de-ecologisation of industry, and the shift towards a service economy were also identified. As a result of cheap labour, “Western European countries tend to establish factories in the countries in question. These actions boost the industry” (R 17) (31 responses).



BUSINESS, according to most respondents, is trying to keep up with Western Europe, but is viewed to be characterised by flourishing corruption. There are hardly any local business groups, the influence of Germany and Russia is strong. In conformity with the previous quotation, another informant stated: “business [is] developing and investors [are] coming from Western Europe because Central Europe has cheaper locations and workers” (R 66) (27 responses).

With respect to TRADE, Central European countries were believed by most respondents to be relatively well developed, but with still more potential, “they cannot make good use of their assets” (R 16). Their most important partners are the EU member states, but they are willing to trade with other countries, too. Central Europe, as an informant summarized, is characterized by “[r]egulated but relatively free trade, with minimal tariff barriers” (R 53) (24 responses).

TRANSPORTATION, especially public transportation was found excellent by most non-European respondents, even if they did not appreciate the “collapsing infrastructure” found in some places (R 7). European informants were less satisfied with countryside services, slow and old-fashioned trains, but were pleased with the increasing role of air transport and cheap airlines. As one of the informants observed: “[d]iversified means of transport can be found there: public (tramways, buses, plains, trains) as well as private (cars, bicycles, motorbikes)” (R 58) (34 responses).

TOURISM in the region was considered by most respondents well developed, even a bit overexploited, especially in capital cities. Central European countries were thought to be relatively cheap, safe for tourists, their welcoming attitude and their historic values could easily make them attractive. An informant, however, warned against some new trends: “enterprise has taken over, & costs for access to national treasures are prohibitive (e.g. in Prague)” (R 53) (40 responses).

Most respondents claimed that SOCIETY in Central European states is depressed, lethargic and conservative, thus appreciates traditional values. It is also divided, but income and wealth inequalities are difficult to judge. A more positive view emphasizes that “family values [are] important, [as is] solidarity among people” (R 66) in the countries of the region (30 responses).

The NATIONALITIES of the inhabitants in Central European countries, according to most respondents, are diverse, with growing tensions and increasing hostility towards minorities. Ethnic minorities in each state are mostly from the neighbouring countries or are romani people. An informant also explored the reasons of this situation: “[v]ery big influence of shared history, and especially of past grievances, in shaping today’s politics, and perhaps traumas not forgotten or wrongs not righted” (R 54) (30 responses).



Central European countries usually have a single official LANGUAGE, the status of the languages spoken by ethnic minorities within each state is often debated, although an informant reported on some positive changes in the field: “[i]ncreasing recognition of minority languages” (R 52). Slavic languages, related to one another, and German were believed to dominate the region. Hungarian is unique and isolated in the area. Most of these languages were considered difficult and inaccessible by the respondents. English was identified as the most widely spoken shared language in Central Europe, but its knowledge was judged as poor among the inhabitants (33 responses).

With respect to MENTALITY, Central European people were described by most respondents as slightly introverted, pessimistic, stressed, sometimes aggressive, hostile or xenophobic, conservative and politically sensitive. An informant observed in the mentality of the inhabitants of the region “[c]ertain inferiority complex, the feeling of being »better Europe«’s poorer cousins” (R 54) (30 responses).

The ARTS in Central European countries, according to most respondents’ views, are of high standards, impressive, traditionally rich and versatile, but not too popular among the local inhabitants, and not too well-known elsewhere in the world. In music, Central Europe was assumed to prefer minor-key melodies. Globalization was said to result in too much respect for the culture of English-speaking nations in Central Europe, where culture is present in different layers: “[h]ighbrow culture is well-represented, but [the real culture is] mainly underground” (R 17) (29 responses).

As most respondents realised, there are overlaps in the CUISINES of the Central European countries. People living in the region are supposed to love meat, beer and spicy dishes, high in fat, and they have a strong crave for a great variety of desserts. Still, some global trends find their ways to affect Central European eating habits, as informants expressed: “[g]reat traditions, yet strong influence of Turkish and American street food” (R 24); local cuisine today is “deteriorating [because of the] invasion of processed foods” (R 7) (33 responses).

Football, ice-hockey, athletics, water sports were listed by many respondents as the most popular SPORTS in Central Europe. Running and individual workout were said to be gaining popularity these days. A critical informant added that “[t]oo much money [is] spent on representative ‘elite’ sport clubs” (R 24) in the region (29 responses).

Although there is no appointed “capital” for the region, the answers to the question “What is the »capital« of the Central European countries?” might show which cities were believed by the respondents to be the most influential CENTRES in the region. The list contains, in order of frequency of occurrence, Vienna, Berlin and Budapest (equal number of votes), Prague, Warsaw, Krakow,



Bratislava, Brussels. Witty responses include “foreign investment” (R 62) and “clever minds” (R 18).

Most respondents were aware that, concerning TIME ZONE, Central European Time (CET) is one hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), though daylight saving summer time in Central Europe (CEST = GMT+02:00) confused some of them (49 responses). With respect to local CURRENCIES in Central Europe, respondents usually knew that euro is accepted in only a few countries, others use national currencies as means of payment: koruna, forint, złoty, kuna, but, surprisingly, dinar, lei, lev, Swiss franc were also mentioned, based on one’s concept of Central Europe. Former currencies, e.g. Latvian lats, Lithuanian litas (replaced by the euro in 2014 and 2015, respectively) were quoted once (43 responses).

Among the typically Central European TRADITIONS respondents listed folk songs, folk dancing, embroidery, harvest feasts, traditional foods, eating pork and beef, shepherding, slaughtering swine, drinking alcohol, painting Easter eggs, the sprinkling of girls with perfume (or water) by boys on Easter Monday, the celebration of St. Nicholas Day, gifts supposedly brought by the Baby Jesus and not by Santa Clause at Christmas, the celebration of “busójárás” in the Hungarian town of Mohács at the end of the Carnival season, celebrating name days, having huge family gatherings. On a more abstract level, “[e]xpertise in philosophy, literature and music” (R 50) was mentioned. Typical Central European VALUES, according to the informants, include hospitality, folk music, traditional clothing, fraternity, partnership, hard work, courage, and respect for family, the elderly, the history and the nation’s freedom as well as for national and religious traditions.

Representative PLACE NAMES quoted from Central Europe by the participants in order of frequency were the following: *Danube, Budapest, Carpathian Mountains/the Carpathians/the Karpaty mountains/Carpathian Basin, Prague, Vienna, Warsaw, the Alps, Bratislava, Balaton, Krakow, Berlin* (several occurrences for all); *Gdańsk, the Tatras, Tisza, Visegrád, Wisła* (2 occurrences for all); *Balkan, Baltic Sea, Black Forest, Black Sea, Brno, Bukovina, Charles Bridge, Deák Ferenc tér, Dubrovnik, Elbe, Ferihegyi airport, Galicia, Great Synagogue in Budapest, Hrad castle, Keleti Palyaudvar Train Station, Krupowki Street in Zakopane in Poland, NRD (DDR), Oder, Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, Rhine, Rhone, Riga, Schoenefeld Airport, Sopot Mountains, St. Gellért Hill, Staatsoper, Szabadka, Temesvár utca, Tempelhof Airport, the Golden Lane in Prague, the Sudetes, Vltava, Vojvodina* (single occurrence for all); based on the conceptualization of Central Europe and on personal experiences.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the online questionnaire survey has proven that all the presupposed cognitive domains appear in today's understanding of the toponym *Central Europe*, with individually varying degrees of elaboration with respect to their contents. Personal experiences concerning Central European countries can cast light on the origins of these differences. Since Central Europe is considered in the literature as an ever-changing mental construct, its present defining features have to reflect the content elements of the cognitive domains constituting the conceptual meaning of the term *Central Europe* in contemporary minds. The results of the present survey, thus, might contribute to drawing up the current valid definition of Central Europe as a historically, culturally, socially, geopolitically determined macro-region in relevant literature.

Internet Resources

- Central Europe | Euronews = <http://www.euronews.com/tag/central-europe> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- Central Europe – EURACTIV.com = <https://www.euractiv.com/sections/central-europe/> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- Central Europe | Economist = <http://www.economist.com/topics/central-europe> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- Central Europe News = <https://world.einnews.com/region/centraleurope?from=centraleurope> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- Central European Media Enterprises = <http://www.cetv-net.com/home/default.aspx> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- Global Tenders – Procurement News from Central Europe = <http://www.globaltenders.com/global-procurement-central-europe.php> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
- MICHAŁEK, MACIEJ 2017. *Wielki plan małych państw. Jak Trójmorze wzmocni lub podzieli Unię* = <http://www.tvn24.pl/magazyn-tvn24/wielki-plan-malych-panstw-jak-trojmorze-wzmocni-lub-podzieli-unie,106,1968> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)
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Masaryk University – Central European Studies Program = <https://czs.muni.cz/en/student-from-abroad/exchange-non-degree-studies/cesp> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)

Palacky University – Semestral Central European Studies = <http://www.kpes.upol.cz/en/semestral-central-european-studies-program?p=2> (Accessed July 14, 2017.)

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Abstract

It is a generally accepted view that Central Europe is a well-established historical–cultural–social–geopolitical space concept, the actual interpretation of which has always been determined by current affairs. Central Europe is an important and flexible term used in several disciplines (e.g. physical geography, cartography, cultural history, politics, economics). The primary focus of relevant literature so far has been to localize Central Europe as a macro-region on geographic and mental maps and/or to justify its existence based on facts



from cultural history. This paper, however, examines the concept of Central Europe from a cognitive linguistic point of view and explores the contents of the contemporary semantics of the term. The author compares and contrasts the results of a questionnaire survey conducted among Hungarian and non-Hungarian respondents on their concept of Central Europe. The encyclopaedic meaning of the toponym *Central Europe* valid today is described in the paper as a vast pool of knowledge and countless associations stored in the mind in the form of a complex matrix of cognitive domains such as COUNTRIES, DOMINANT LANDSCAPE FEATURES, GEOPOLITICAL POSITION, POLITICAL ORIENTATION, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, POPULATION DENSITY, SOCIETY, NATIONALITIES, LANGUAGES, MENTALITY, RELIGIONS, EDUCATION, ECONOMY, BUSINESS, COMMERCE, TRANSPORTATION, TOURISM, SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS, ARTS, ARCHITECTURE, CUISINE, SPORTS, EXPERIENCES, PREFERENCES, REFUSALS and ONOMASTIC DIVERSITY.

Keywords: Central Europe, cognitive linguistics, conceptualization, encyclopaedic meaning, interdisciplinarity