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Our Common Home: Eastern Europe / Central Europe / Post-Communist Europe as Signifiers of Cultural-Political Geographies and Identities¹

Abstract: The article discusses the historical mutability and political connotations of the geographical signifiers Eastern and Central Europe, and the chronotope Post-Soviet / Post-Communist Europe. It considers the tensions present in these denominations, arguing for the need to defamiliarize and re-define them. Three major sections survey the circumstances that shaped the referential and connotative values of the terms from the Enlightenment to the era of European integration. The article notes commonalities in the defining experiences of the countries in the east of Europe: their emergence from the ruins of former empires (Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman) and of the Soviet bloc. It considers whether the spatial terms have been developed from within or imposed from the outside, and discusses how they have perpetuated stereotypes of the region under consideration and its people(s) and generated enduring cultural myths. It concludes by proposing terms that recoup the cultural significance of the region—East-Central

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Europe, its close correlative East-Centre Europe, the neologism Europeast—and by alerting scholars working on transnational Shakespeare adaptations to the importance of recontextualizing research in individual national traditions as part of a larger investigation of the mutual translatability of shared experiences.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Post-Soviet Europe, East-Central Europe, transnational Shakespeare, intra-European stereotypes, nationalism.

In his pioneering book, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*, Zdeněk Stříbrný set out to create “a fuller survey of Shakespeare’s impact on the whole of Europe” and to “give Eastern Europe its due” (1). Our theoretical article, part of the multinational project “Crossing Borders with Shakespeare,” grapples with the significance of the geopolitical terminology used. It surveys the historically contingent human constructions of Eastern Europe as a space in which Shakespearean creations, among other cultural products, have circulated, and argues for an informed choice in the application of spatial terms and awareness of their ideological implications.

So what is this space: how has it been named and what can we make of its shifting designations? Stříbrný points to its mutable geographical boundaries, extending “from the Baltic to the Black Sea..., Ukraine and Belarus,” and including Russia, the Balkan states, Hungary (3-4), and Germany (57-76, 126-132). But the spatial terminology is not entirely consistent. While the title of the monograph clearly spells out “Eastern Europe,” the scope of the survey is described on the dust jacket of the hard copy as “the whole of Eastern and East Central Europe.” The discrepancy signals a tension in the geopolitical vocabulary, which this essay analyzes. Aware of the shifting conceptualizations of Eastern Europe, Stříbrný opted for a tight historical-political focus on “Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain” (4), singling out the experience of Communism and post-Communism as common for a number of European countries. In this sense his *apparatus criticus* is consistent with the Cold-War political divide in Europe, which continued to inform the concept of Eastern Europe at the end the 20th century. In the context of European integration and its challenges this approach is due for modification.

Linguistic, cultural, and political differences notwithstanding, we contend that commonalities in the historical experiences of the nations in this part of Europe well precede the Cold War era. To begin with, they were formed in the aftermath of the collapse of empires: Russian, 1917; Austro-Hungarian, 1918; German, 1918; Ottoman, 1820s-1918. Most had been on the borderlands of these empires; consequently, when the new sovereign states were established, their territories and political affiliations were shaped by the strategic games of the victors in imperial conflicts. Their borders were drawn and redrawn (more than once) without consideration for local populations and were often

deliberately created to foster further conflicts (Jalava and Stråth 46). (In this respect, the history of Eastern Europe offers another chapter, along with that of Africa and Asia to the study of the legacy of empires.) Pressed by the interests of “the great powers,” threatened “by the prospect of the destruction of the nation” or its fragmentation (Kiss 113), and yearning for self-preservation, national emancipation and territorial gain, these small states have fought wars in which they have inflicted heinous crimes on their domestic Others and their closest neighbours. Ethnic cleansing and suppression of linguistic and religious identities cast a long shadow on the region and form an indelible part of the post-imperial legacy in Eastern Europe; tensions flare up to this day. This can make the discussion of transnational historical, political, social, or cultural questions particularly fraught. Hence the imperative to conduct such discussions openly, with awareness of the importance of language in shaping history and identity. To put the matter in the words of the 2023 winner of the International Booker Prize, Bulgarian writer and public intellectual Georgi Gospodinov, “If not remembered, our past has the capacity to return, over and over again, disguised as our future” (“Izdavat ‘Vremeubezhishte’”).

In addition to the legacies of the old empires, the countries in this geopolitical area endured a second imperial dependency after the Second World War, and had to dig themselves out of its ruins. Whether, between 1945 and 1989, they were part of the Soviet Union or formally independent, though satellite, states, they have a *double* imperial legacy: the memory of the old empires was overlaid by the common imperial heritage of Soviet communism. Unfortunately, the chapter of imperial history within Europe is still unfinished. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, its successor state, the Russian Federation, has pursued irredentist claims to parts of the former Russian Empire and the former Soviet Union, resorting to military aggression in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine, and systematically seeking to expand its neo-imperial sphere of influence. The common historical trauma experienced by East European nations during the Communist era and doubly encoded in their historical memory has manifested itself in the affective affinity with the Ukrainian effort to counter the Russian invasion.

Soviet-era totalitarianism violently restructured East European societies, closed borders and restricted freedom of settlement within countries, brought about mass impoverishment and environmental disasters, and enforced intellectual and cultural control. At the same time, this experience, as well as its aftermath, were marked by profound ambiguities, which have been milked by nostalgic post-Communist mythmakers. One of these, at the very heart of the Communist system, is the chameleon slippage between ideology and practice: while ideology preached humanist values, its practice plunged society into state-sponsored violence and moral degradation (Todorov, *The Totalitarian Experience* 42). Another ambiguity follows from the way Communism

collapsed. Since it fell without a military defeat but rather, succumbed to the accumulated weight of economic, environmental, and military lies, the Communist *nomenclatura* (the top-echelon Party members and their families) and those whose rights and lives had been trampled by it often found themselves together in the new world, without clear distinction between victims and victimizers. Thus, a fully “equitable social resolution” could not be achieved “because the former Communist leaders, their families and entourage, had... become the richest men in their countries, large landowners and employers” (Todorov, *The Totalitarian Experience* 43). The Communist experiment may have ended, but not without tainting post-Communist societies.

Given these historical contexts, we should exercise care with geopolitical terminology when discussing how Shakespeare has filtered into the cultural consciousness of East European nations. His works have been woven into narratives of national identity as culturally European, a process in which myth-making and cultification have played their part, as Péter Dávidházi reminds us. Performances, translations, adaptations, and tradaptations were the routes through which Shakespeare’s plays rooted themselves in continental European cultures. Local theatre cultures provided the fertile soil for the success of English travelling players (Limon; Drábek and Katritzky) who, together with local companies performing in public spaces and aristocratic theatres, helped disseminate Shakespeare’s work (Drábek).

It was the Enlightenment and Romantic movements in Germany, which transformed Shakespeare into a vehicle for national self-expression. German culture and the evolution of the modern German language are considered “unthinkable” without “the Wieland, Schlegel, Tieck and Baudissin version of [Shakespeare’s] plays” (Hamburger 73). Similarly, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries Shakespeare was embedded in processes of political emancipation from the European empires, “drawing attention to [the] predicaments or idiosyncrasies” of national cultures (Kujawińska Courtney 243). The plays were translated into multiple languages; before long they were staged in the new national theatres, themselves important institutions of nation-building. As Shakespeare’s works were “nostrified” or “naturalized” (Minier 180), they began accruing political valency. Along with and sometimes integrated into literatures described by Csaba Kiss as dedicated to the cause of “national liberation and the formulation of the national ideology” (128), they were absorbed into larger cultural processes, helping articulate identities as “autonomous,” “national,” “Western,” “European,” depending on the exigencies of the historical context. Shakespeare’s overwhelmingly positive reception was facilitated by the fact that in Europe the English language was not a vehicle for imposing the cultural and educational dictates of a colonial power; rather, translated into different European languages, his works have been used to bolster *national* cultural and literary stature. If anything, the cultural historiographers of

East European states appear to have engaged in “a latent, unofficial competition ... as to which nation has the first mention of Shakespeare, produced the first translation, the first translation from the ‘original’,” etc. (Minier 180).

During the Communist era, totalitarian governments sought to subjugate national ideologies to the grand international narrative of Marxist ideology. Accordingly, Shakespeare’s established canonicity was embraced by the regimes, and his work “was officially elevated to the heights of the new ideological canon, with the fathers of Marxism at the apex of the pyramid and a number of other authors graded in a descending order beneath them” (Shurbanov and Sokolova 21). A set of policies mandated the manner of recruiting of the plays for such ideological purposes. However, theatre practitioners frequently staged Shakespeare, overtly and more often covertly, for the purposes of political critique, making the plays a double-edged political weapon of Aesopian innuendo. On the one hand, East European Shakespeare was tasked to prop up the system through his much-extolled humanism (the amorphous value supposed to be at the heart of the Communist experiment), on the other—the productions’ Aesopian language often corroded the ideological message and practice of Communism. As during the era of national formation, Shakespeare again was used to shape the political consciousness and political literacy of East Europeans; at the same time, East European theatre professionals gave Shakespeare a political home.

In the post-Communist era, the crudely ideological approach to Shakespeare was cast away. During the strenuous and sometimes dispiriting transition from totalitarianism, which began after 1989, theatre experienced a rapid diversification of approaches, amongst which the political retained its importance. As populism and autocratic governmental policies gained momentum after 2010, a growing number of Shakespeare theatre productions addressed political issues. Along with new translations, new adaptations, tradaptations, and transcreations, the plays cultivated—and sometimes provoked—a civic discourse about pivotal social shifts, moral cowardice and courage, political ethics, national myths and their manipulators, art and consumerism.²

To sum up, during the struggles for national emancipation from declining empires, East European countries followed roughly similar paths in appropriating Shakespeare for their respective nation-building projects. In the totalitarian era these appropriation processes started to converge, inculcating habits of interpreting Shakespeare politically and training audiences to read the plays against the grain of dominant ideology. Political and ethical engagements

² A case study of post-communist productions of *Hamlet* as building *communitas* and questioning political and ethical developments during the transition era is “‘To be/not to be:’ *Hamlet* and the threshold of potentiality in post-communist Bulgaria” by Kirilka Stavreva and Boika Sokolova.

with Shakespeare continued strong in the post-Communist era. Hence, the transcreations with which the research project “Crossing Borders with Shakespeare” engages are products of parallel, overlapping, and common historical circumstances, in which Shakespeare has been used as a vehicle for cultural expression, critique, and reflection.

Naming, Geographies and Identities

While we take it for granted that the production, transmission, and reception of the Shakespeare transcreations at the core of this transnational collaborative research project are products of human agency, we often forget that they originate and circulate in a space, which is itself the product of cognitive habits. As Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi contend in the introduction of their important collection, *European Regions and Boundaries*, the traditionally “multi-ethnic / transnational regions” of Europe are “specific *lieux de mémoire*” (1). The phrase underscores both the constructed quality of spatial categories and the power of memory to “create” and naturalize them. “Becoming aware of the historical contingency of spatial terminology,” Mishkova and Trencsényi caution, “also contributes to questioning the underlying assumptions of national historical cultures based on the purported naturalness of space” (3). Such awareness of the constructed underlying assumptions about space and culture is important in humanistic projects, including those focused on Shakespearean adaptation and transmission. Labelling a specific study as Eastern European, Central European, Post-Soviet, Post-Communist, etc., relies on and solidifies particular ways of thinking about this part of Europe, which may serve individual scholarly aims, but inevitably carries historical biases. Conversely, when we de-naturalize space as a cognitive foundation for articulating national identities, we open up possibilities for reimagining space and allow for the fluid re-articulation of cultural identities, be they national, regional, or European.

The next three sections of this geo-historical survey begin with a discussion of the tenuous geography of the mesoregions (medium-sized transnational regions) in the east of Europe. In each, we bring out the historical mutability of the terms used to map this space. Overlaps, divergences and cognitive tensions between different linguistic and discursive terms are pointed out. As we draw attention to the various re-iterations of the constructed geography of this European meso-region, from the Enlightenment to the present, we note whether the terms have been developed from within or imposed from the outside. We discuss how the use of these terms has perpetuated stereotypes of the regions and their people(s), and ingrained cultural myths. Finally, we assess the cultural-political connotations and effects of associated cultural tropes within discourses of inclusion and exclusion.

Our aim is to foster critical awareness of the affective, rhetorical, and political functions of the binary oppositions between East and West, European centre and its eastern margin, inclusivity and exclusion/fragmentation—oppositions that Roberto Dainotto argues are deeply embedded in “the rhetorical unconscious” (8). What historical narratives associated with the terms Eastern Europe, Central Europe, their multiple subdivisions (“East Central Europe,” “Southeastern Europe,” “The Baltic,” “The Balkans,” “The Western Balkans,” etc.), and “post-Communist Europe” can be useful in discussions of Shakespearean exchanges? Should we give up on some of the most familiar terms, should we modify them, or appropriate by defamiliarizing them and giving them new meanings?

Eastern Europe

Where does Eastern Europe begin and end? What does it lie east of? No fewer than ten geographical points have been claimed as Europe’s centre, presumably demarcating its East from its West (“Geographical midpoint of Europe”). The site first declared to be the midpoint was in Poland (1775), followed by sites in today’s Slovakia (1815), Ukraine (1887), Czech Republic (after the Second World War), Sweden (1988), Lithuania (1989), Hungary (1992), Belarus (2000), and most recently, Estonia (2008). All these places feature official markers, the most impressive of which is a star-crowned column in Lithuania, unveiled in 2004, the year of the country’s accession to the European Union. The markers and monuments of Europe’s geographical centre may demonstrate the development (and problems) of scientific methods of measurement, but they also participate in a larger socio-cultural discourse of European identity. A case in point is provided by the Lithuanian site, the only marker listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It has become a major tourist attraction with an Open-Air Museum of the Centre of Europe and a sculpture park, in addition to the monument. This elaborate arrangement, its commodification, and popularization through an international publication offer a fine example of some of the processes of embedding cultural narratives about geography into the popular unconscious and naturalizing them as “facts.”

The indeterminacy of the geographical centre of Europe is one of the difficulties in defining the continent’s mesoregions. What is particularly interesting in this case is that countries seem eager to locate it east of their own borders, as Frithjof Benjamin Schenk astutely observes. Thus, in contemporary popular German use, *Osteuropa* usually refers to a space “stretching eastwards from the border of the rivers Oder and Neisse and the Bohemian Mountains” (Schenk 189). Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians, however, would disagree with belonging to the European East, and tend to think of themselves as

Central European. Along similar lines, Ukrainians and Belarusians often think of themselves as living *between* Western and Eastern Europe, which implies that for them, Eastern Europe is synonymous with Russia. In Russian self-conceptualization, however, *Vostok* (East) refers to the Far East.

For Russia, it is not the East (*Vostok*), but Europe and the ever-morphing “West” that serve as the other in the process of self-identification. The centuries-long debates among Russian historians and philosophers about the country’s relationship with “the West” notwithstanding, since the 19th century Russia has thought of itself “as its own cultural space,” significantly, when considering the relationship of Russia and Europe (Schenk 189). During Gorbachev’s perestroika and for a few years after 1989, Russia briefly projected a conciliatory and inclusive vision of a unified “European community for the 21st century” of which it was an indelible part (Gorbachev). However, since 2000, under Vladimir Putin’s rule, the notion of Russian exceptionalism implicit in the old binary opposition Russia/Europe (the West) has morphed into an increasingly aggressive neo-imperialist project entitled *Rusky mir* (Russian World).³ By 2008 *Rusky mir* was weaponized as a policy doctrine, which envisaged the unification of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in a “‘sacred’ East Slavic orthodox community ... evoking the old idea of Holy Russia” (Jilge). In this scheme of things, Russia positioned itself as Byzantium’s spiritual successor and sole leader of the Orthodox world. As Mikhail Suslov explains, the most conservative turn of this “confrontational, irredentist and isolationist” project (Suslov, abstract) began implementation in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (Suslov 25). These aggressions were steps toward the project’s goal of creating a transnational union of all Russian-speaking populations, wherever in the world they may be, under the mantle of fundamentalist Russian Orthodoxy. This amounts to expanding Russian influence within and beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, supposedly offering an alternative to the so-called moral decadence of the West—an assimilatory project disguised as isolationist exceptionalism.

Unlike *Rusky mir*, Eastern Europe is a concept developed from the outside. As a cultural notion and mental space for Western fantasies, “Eastern Europe” came into being at the same time as “the Orient” and the rise of the “Hellenistic movement” during the Enlightenment. The designation relies on a model of stages and degrees of civilization, introduced by 18th and 19th-century French, English and German philosophers. In this model, Western Europe consisted of self-identified “civilized” nation states, while Eastern Europe was a generalized space considered to be “on a developmental scale that measured

³ The *Rusky mir* foreign policy project is funded through a host of state and NGO sources, including a government-sponsored foundation of the same name, established in 2007 with a decree by Vladimir Putin.

the distance between civilization and barbarism” (Wolff 13, see also Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians* 28-31). As Schenk points out, there were also ethnic and racial overtones to the regional divisions conjured up by 19th-century authors. Thus, Ernest Charrière posited in his monumental study *The Politics of History* (1841-1842) the existence of two distinct European races, a “*race occidentale*,” and a “*race asiatique*” who inhabited the territory east of the river Oder and the slopes of the Slovenian Alps where “*une autre Europe*,” mostly Slavic, began (qtd. in Schenk 195).

Whether seen as sites of pleasure or as economic adjuncts populated by racial inferiors, the Orient and Eastern Europe became desirable as territories for subordination and colonization. An example of the slippage between the two is the French way of referring to Eastern Europe (used as late as the First World War) as *Europe Orientale* or *l’Orient Européen* (the Orient of Europe) (Wolff 6). The conceptualization of Eastern Europe as part of the colonizing and economic aspirations of competing European empires is evident in the German, French, and Russian designations of various East-European regions, such as the Balkans, South-Eastern Europe, *Südostforschung*. As Diana Mishkova explains, before and during the First World War, *Südostforschung* related to Austro-Hungarian and German interests in an “adjacent area open up for grabs” (144). For Germany, the region was part of a vision of a strong *Mitteleuropa*, in which the Balkan Peninsula lay in a German sphere of interest. Anxious about this, the French preferred to designate the territory in ethno-linguistic terms, describing the South Slavs “as the moral, political, and racial opposite to the Germans” (Mishkova 145).

Religious difference is another element in the semantics of the European East/West binary, used to differentiate between Eastern and Central Europe. The opposition goes back to the division of the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE and was conceptually strengthened by the Great Schism of 1054 between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Stefan Berger notes that the “schism produced both self-descriptions and descriptions of ‘the other,’ which operated with notions of space” (18). The Orthodox East projected itself as a stronghold of spirituality and, in turn, associated the Catholic West with the political overreach of the papacy. Conversely, Catholic Europe cast itself as more dynamic, and viewed the East as stuck in mysticism. The Reformation complicated these lines of religious division. Protestantism penetrated deep into Western and Central Europe, and created a new line of division between the Protestant North and the Catholic South (Berger 19). Nonetheless, as governments became increasingly secularized during the 19th century, the terms of the old division between “Oriental/Eastern” (Orthodox) Christianity and “Western” (Catholic and Protestant) Christianity were revamped into an opposition between Eastern despotism on the one hand, and Western liberty and the rule of law on the other. The association of East European countries with

despotism persisted in spite of the fact that during the last three decades of the 19th century constitutionalism and the rule of law became the form of state organization practiced *throughout* Europe (with the exception of the Russian and Ottoman Empires). Yet, French liberal historiographers from this era continued to consider Eastern Europe and Russia as “almost identical” religious, political, and cultural entities (Schenk 194).

The proliferation of the various East/West binaries by influential intellectual, academic, and political circles have infiltrated language, giving birth to pernicious cultural stereotypes of East Europeans. Among these is the image of a student to be instructed by a Western master and of a semi-civilized and volatile Other who is in the process of becoming fully European, a notion which Marje Kuus suggests was “an unspoken premise of EU and NATO enlargement” that began in 1999 (474). During the Communist era, Soviet-modelled ideological propaganda countered such stereotypes and created its own: Eastern Europe (the Soviet Bloc) was presented as a staunch protector of equality and flag bearer in the march toward the end of history. Ironically, Francis Fukuyama also associated East Europeans with the end of history, albeit in a very different context. In his famous 1989 essay, celebrating the end of the Cold War, he defined the end of history and “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final point of human government” (Fukuyama 4).⁴

Needless to say, stereotypes have glaring blind spots. On the opposite end from the imagined *Europe Orientale* with its tentative European-ness stands the idea of Greece as foundational to the Western self-image. Like its East European neighbours, Bulgaria and Serbia, that country was part of the Ottoman Empire up until the 19th century. It is proudly Christian Orthodox. Moreover, it has a 20th-century history of military authoritarianism and brutality in creating a single-nation state. Nonetheless, Greece has never been classified as East European. Since 18th-century Hellenism proclaimed it a cradle of the West (along with Imperial Rome), it has had a different status from its Balkan neighbours on the mental map of the West. Apart from Greece’s undoubtedly strategic position, its mythical standing as a cornerstone of Western civilization informed the post-Second World War division of the continent. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, Winston Churchill traded with Joseph Stalin the fate of millions of East Europeans, consigning them to the Soviet sphere of influence, only to proclaim in his speech in Fulton (1946) that “Athens alone—Greece with its immortal glories—[was] free.” Vaguely Hellenistic thinking underpinned Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s endorsement of the readmission of Greece, in 1981, to the European Economic Community, when he parried

⁴ First published in the summer of 1989, Fukuyama’s controversial essay, “The End of History?” was expanded as the monograph *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

objections that the country was far from ready with the line, “What is Europe without *Plato*?” (MacShane).

As Churchill’s Fulton speech drew the “Iron Curtain” across Europe, it valorized a new meaning of Eastern Europe and of its binary, Western Europe—the latter term, as Berger suggests, only gaining traction during the Cold War (16). The continent’s division and the terminological readjustments were cemented in Andrei Zhdanov’s 1947 Cominform speech, which branded the West as reactionary, aggressive, imperialist, and defined the Eastern Bloc as “democratic, anti-fascist, peace-loving.” Rivaling Churchill’s metaphor, Zhdanov presented a notion of Eastern Europe in lockstep with Soviet foreign policy, as a united front against the “American plan for the enthrallment of Europe” (meaning the Marshall Plan).⁵ The Russian imperial dream of westward expansion had become reality in the Soviet era, maintained through repression and bloodshed. Hundreds of forced labour camps were opened throughout the “Bloc.” Their human-crushing cruelty, along with the violent clampdown on any act of resistance became the *modus operandi* of the system. Such was the suppression of the Bulgarian anti-communist partisan “Goryani” movement (1945-1949; 1950-1956), of the Poznań workers’ protests (1956), the drowning in blood of the Hungarian uprising (1956), and the military invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968). They demonstrated the durability of the Iron Curtain and the subordination of the Communist Bloc countries to the dictate of the Soviet Union.

To sum up, Eastern Europe is not just an elusive geographical designation, but a concept with Orientalist and exclusionary historical connotations, which relate it to the subaltern and/or the ideological Other. This way of thinking has had major consequences and a tragic impact on the lives of millions of people. No wonder that many “Eastern Europeans” consider such identity “little more than a historical and moral stigma” (Bottoni 1).

Is it possible, then, to reclaim the concept of Eastern Europe for the current work on the routes and roots of Shakespearean transcreations originating in this part of Europe? Can we emulate what the field of Disability Studies has done for crip theory, and Sexuality Studies for queer theory? What would it take to do this? One thing is clear: such effort would demand a candid reflection on the existing conceptual tensions among Eastern, Central and Western Europe, and the notion of Europe itself.

⁵ The division of Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War also involved stipulations about the European North and South. However, the East / West stand-off resulted in marginalizing discussions of the geopolitical alignment of Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Finland.

Central Europe (Mitteleuropa, Zwischeneuropa)

The difficulties in defining Eastern Europe geographically persist when attempting to map the space of Central Europe. Not only is Europe's centre constantly shifting, as discussed above, the space itself seems to expand and contract; accordingly, the term "Central Europe" is a floating signifier. To use Mária Ormos's poetic phrasing, "just like the Danube, Central Europe is something that constantly changes" (10). Since the introduction of the term in the early 19th century, its meaning has been affected by politics as embedded in language, as exemplified by the divergent connotations of *Mitteleuropa*, *Zwischeneuropa*, *L'Europe Centrale*,⁶ the Masarykian *New Europe* (1920), and the *Other Europe* of the 1970s and 1980s.

As mentioned earlier, the transnational regions designated as Central Europe seem to work as mutable "lieux de mémoire." One such historically contingent spatial construct conceptualizes Central Europe in opposition to Eastern Europe on the basis of the medieval religious schism between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism (Dvorník 307; Szűcs 72). Later complicated by the Reformation, the understanding of Central Europe as non-Orthodox has had a long historical currency. Another rather restrictive use of the term aligns it with the German sphere of political and cultural influence. Contrasted to views of Central Europe as non-Orthodox or as German in orientation is its conceptualization as distinctively multicultural and multilingual—thus including not only Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, but also the Balkans and Ukraine.

As Trencsényi summarizes, "the geographical frame [of Central Europe] has been radically elastic depending on who is speaking" (181). The external viewpoints of the old imperial powers (German, French, English) risk being too general, the internal (small-state Central European) too narrow. None of the uses of the term can be politically or culturally neutral (Trávníček 243). If we consider its history, we note that problems of inclusion or exclusion persist to the present, with the result that Central Europe or East Central Europe are "conceptual clusters rather than individual concepts," implicated in discourses of "othering and counter-concepts" (Mishkova and Trencsényi 2).

Tracing the history of the term Central Europe helps shed light on the political baggage it carries. When introduced in the early 19th century, it was tied to the pan-Germanic ideas of political and economic theorists like Friedrich List and Constantin Frantz, who disregarded the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region. Rejecting the notion of a German-dominated Central Europe, Czech

⁶ As Ormos clarifies, the idea of *L'Europe Centrale* emerged in French political discourse between 1918 and 1932, aiming to counter German political hegemony (12, 19).

liberals like Karel Havlíček Borovský and František Palacký developed the idea of Austro-Slavism to acknowledge the role of the Slavic nations in the Habsburg monarchy, and, at the same time, oppose the pan-Slavic movement headed by Russia. The German geographer Johann August Zeune coined the term *Mittleuropa*, widely used in political regional studies to this day, which he loosely defined as “third region” dominated by German *and* Slavic populations, and including the multiethnic Carpathian basin (Trencsényi 166).

The concept gained wider political traction before and during the First World War in the writings of the German liberal politician Friedrich Naumann (1915). For him *Mittleuropa* was “a concentric framework pitting the continental German-dominated center against the Eastern and Western peripheries.” Naumann’s contemporary, geographer Albrecht Penck, introduced a different term, *Zwischeneuropa* (1915), imagining Germany as “the spinal column of continental Europe, [which was] to be organized into a state of federation” under its leadership (Trencsényi 167). Both saw Germany’s central place as justification for its controlling role in European economic and political affairs (Neumann 16). Naumann’s term *Mittleuropa* gained negative connotations after Hitler’s seizure of power and the Second World War (Trávníček 261).

A counter-narrative to these pan-Germanic ideas was developed by the politician, philosopher and first president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Masaryk in his treatise *The New Europe* (1918), which ignited the imagination of Czechs and Slovaks at the dawn of the country’s independence. Rejecting German supremacy, he “offered a common regional narrative for the small nations between Germany and Russia” as a barrier against the expansionism of both powers (Trencsényi 168). Masaryk described Central Europe as “a peculiar zone of small nations extending from the North Cape [in Norway] to Cape Matapan [in Greece]” and including “Laplanders, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes, Finns, Estonians, Letts [Latvians], Lithuanians, Poles, Lusatians [Sorbian, or West-Slavic Germans in the Lusatian Lake District], Czechs and Slovaks, Magyars, Serbo-Croats and Slovenes, Roumanians, Bulgars, Albanians, Turks and Greeks” (272). Yet in spite of his enthusiasm for democratic alliance, he never considered a federalist union of independent Central European states.

In the aftermath of the First World War, then, Central Europe was re-imagined “not only without Germany, but against it.” It was seen as a “pro-Western buffer zone between Soviet Russia and Germany, ... the product of exceptional circumstances: the power vacuum created by the simultaneous World War I collapse of Germany and Russia” (Rupnik 241). Several federalist ideas for Central Europe appeared during the turmoil of the Second World War. In 1942, the exiled Czechoslovak politician Milan Hodža published *Federation in Central Europe*, envisioning a confederation of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Greece (Lukáč 99). Apart from individual projects like Hodža’s, exiled politicians from the area conducted negotiations about a federalist union of their countries after the war.

The failure of such ideas was unsurprising, as “multilateral logic has always succumbed to the superior bilateral logic of power” (Trávníček 268).

The bilateralism imposed by the Great Powers at the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Iron Curtain subsumed Central Europe into Eastern or Communist Europe. When the term was revived in the 1980s, it was used as a cultural, rather than economic or political concept.⁷ Its propagators were mainly dissidents from the Communist countries, as well as expatriate politicians and historians living in the West (Trávníček 276). An important role was played by *Cross Currents, a Yearbook of Central European Culture*, published at the University of Michigan between 1982 and 1993, edited by Ladislav Matejka. The journal offered an international scholarly platform for Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Polish dissidents, like Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Václav Havel, and Stanisław Baranczak. Years later, Matejka summarized its focus: “The theme of Central Europe as an abandoned West or a place where East and West collide ... provided a framework for including not only Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary but also Romania [...], Lithuania [...], the Balto-Slavic Latvia [...], Ukraine [...] and the distinct cultural zones of Yugoslavia” (Matejka).

The general public was introduced to the idea of Central Europe as a shared cultural space by Milan Kundera’s famous essay, “The Tragedy of Central Europe”, published in French under the title “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragedie de l’Europe centrale” in 1983 and soon after released in London and New York. Kundera, by then living in Paris, argued for a Central Europe as a West kidnapped by the Communist Russian East. He was referring exclusively to Communist Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, emphasizing the role of culture for the survival of these nations wedged between Germany and Russia. Kundera argued for a culturally, not geographically, defined Central Europe, an emanation of “the greatest variety within the smallest space” as opposed to a “Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space [...], uniform, standardizing, centralizing” (33). This view, though criticized as a simplified and rather exclusionary “pop version of the Central Europe concept” (Susan Sontag, qtd. in Trávníček 204), nonetheless put Central Europe on the mental map of the world.

After the collapse of Communism, the ideas championed by dissident intellectuals in the 1980s were embraced by the political leaderships of Poland, Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Hungary, leading to the establishment of the Visegrád Group (1991) and the countries’ coordinated accession to the European Union in 2004. Cultural institutions supporting the

⁷ European historian Timothy Garton Ash has argued for the usefulness of the term Central Europe in academic discourse as a reminder, especially to Western scholars, “that the academic study of this region could be more than footnotes to Sovietology.”

distinctiveness of this more narrowly defined Central Europe were established. In 1991, Hungarian-born Jewish American businessman George Soros founded the Central European University in Prague; in 1996 it moved to Budapest, and in 2019 (for political reasons) to Vienna. The vicissitudes experienced by this institution demonstrate the increased cultural and political pressures on the alignment of Central Europe with Western liberalism in recent years. Government and legislative actions against gender and sexuality rights in Poland, against immigration in Hungary and Slovakia, as well as government resistance to European Union sanctions of Russia for waging war against Ukraine in Hungary show the erosion of the Visegrád Group's cultural identification with Western liberalism.

A foundational cultural myth of Central European identity is the Romantic metaphor of the centre located between West and East, profiting or suffering from both. This experience of "in-between-ness," of being wedged between a Russia-dominated East and an "advanced" Western Europe (mostly symbolized by Berlin and Paris), may account for the supremacy of culture in self-identification narratives. Living under the rule or in the shadow of empires, the survival of one's own language and culture became a tool for political emancipation. Culture and especially literature took the role of lay religion for Central European identity, creating a "homeland in the sky," in the words of Hungarian poet Gyula Illyés.⁸

Critiquing an exclusionary understanding of Central Europe, Trencsényi shows how the term "was often used as a counter-concept of something else (originally more of the West, later of the East), [serving] at the same time ... the purpose of creating symbolic bonds between national frameworks that seemed to be in permanent conflict" (181). On his part, Timothy Garton Ash uncovers "an interesting semantic division" in the political rhetoric of 1980s dissident public intellectuals, who "use the terms 'Eastern Europe' or 'East European' when the context is neutral or negative; when they write 'Central' or 'East Central,' the statement is invariably positive, affirmative, or downright sentimental."

Unlike Masaryk's broadly inclusive understanding of Central Europe, such distancing from the East comes across as an instance of what Milica Bakić-Hayden has defined as "nesting orientalism," or a gradation of "Orients" reproducing the East/West dichotomy of the Enlightenment. Its extreme manifestation is Balkanism, the presentation of the Balkans as the Other of Central Europe, "sometimes alongside with, sometimes indistinguishable from" Russia (Todorova 160). "In this pattern," Bakić-Hayden writes, "Asia is more 'East' or 'other' than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation

⁸ The first translations of Shakespeare into Hungarian, Czech, Polish and Slovak by the Romantic generation were key to the birth of their respective national literatures, around which national identities grew. On the Romantic cult of Shakespeare in Hungary, see Péter Dávidházi.

is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as the most ‘eastern;’ within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies” (918). Ironically, the use of Central Europe to lay claim to a desired (West-) European identity and status has resulted not only in the othering of the East of Europe, but also in a multiplication of Eastern Europes (Kuus 484).

As a historically contingent concept, Central Europe raises a similar host of questions for studies of the literatures and cultures of the region as does Eastern Europe. The challenge then is not to endorse a perception of it as an un-East or a “kidnapped West,” thus perpetuating the old binaries. The challenge is to foster an understanding of the complexity of Central Europe not only as a conduit between East and West, but as a site of local intercultural exchanges—precisely the task at the core of this transnational Shakespeare project.

Post-Soviet/Post-Communist Europe

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the Eastern Bloc chronotope was transformed into “post-Soviet/post-Communist Europe,” a space both outside the polity of the European Union and potentially offering opportunities for its expansion. Once again, the boundaries of this space were uncertain and continuously morphing, subject to economic, political and even military pressures. This was very much a transitional space. Countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Bloc or the Soviet sphere of influence (like former Yugoslavia) could ostensibly embrace the values and structures of the European Union or else align themselves with Russian interests and *Rusky mir*. The choice was influenced by geography and the external support or external pressure exercised upon the various countries’ political forces. In the case of former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine, it has been thwarted by Russian military occupation and aggression.

Post-Communist countries which made the choice to join the EU were not without external pressures. No longer Eastern and not yet Western, they were expected to follow and adapt to the model of free-market economy and democratic governance. The lexical in-betweenness signalled by the term evokes the Enlightenment notion of Eastern Europe as not *quite* European. This externally developed definition was now subtly transformed into an understanding of post-Communist Europe “as not *yet* European” (Kuus 473, emphasis added). In fact, given the large-scale destruction in the 1990s of the already underperforming centralized economies, the devastation of almost all social support networks as well as of cultural and educational institutions, and the demographic crisis, the post-Communist countries’ scale of development was downgraded. They were “no longer treated as a second world—antagonistic but capable of industrial innovation—but as a variant of third world—and hence a space under Western tutelage” (Kuus 475; see also Cohen and Wedel).

While the back-loaded term “post-Soviet/post-Communist Europe” may capture the historic fall of a totalitarian regime, it is problematic in a number of ways. First, it reduces two centuries of geopolitical, cultural, and intellectual self-identifications by small European nations to the historical experience of the communist era. Next, ironically enough, it recycles the language of Zhdanov’s “Soviet Bloc,” perpetuating stereotypes that reinforce the East/West binary opposition in the era of European integration. During the hard decades of the transition, the semantic privilege of this binary’s Western pole went hand in hand with imposing financial and economic deprivation on the East. Critics of the neo-liberal methods of the post-Communist transition, notably Marcela Kostihová, have pointed out their exploitative nature. These methods included the “structural adjustment” of economies as a prerequisite for international loans, blunt enforcement of “free markets” markedly different from the subsidized agriculture and the regulatory mechanisms of markets in the west of Europe, brutal “shock therapy” and more. “In the aftermath of the West’s official relinquishment of its colonies,” Kostihová writes, “neoliberalism has come to replace (and frequently expand) the frontiers of predominantly Western economic and political exploitation,” peddling “colonialism in far more elegant new clothes” (25-26).

It may appear that the post-Soviet/post-Communist historical experience, exacerbated by the quasi-colonial nature of the neoliberal transition, might call for the application of a postcolonial theoretical framework. However, we suggest that a whole-sale application of postcolonial theory to Shakespeare Studies in the context of Eastern Europe amounts to embracing a problematic vestigial paradigm and should be done with care. Mainstream post-colonial theorists have not shown much interest in the post-imperial post-Soviet experience. Partially, this is because Western audiences are interested in atoning for the atrocities of their own empires as long as these are outside of Europe. Partially, because the ill-defined image of Eastern Europe in Western geopolitical discourse has obscured intra-European imperial pasts. If a postcolonial theoretical framework were to be applied to cultural work in the post-Soviet/post-Communist era specifically, it would need to confront residual admiration for the imperial heritage embedded in national cultural mythmaking.

The Perils of Centrifugal Nationalisms in the East of Europe: Some Considerations for an Informed Use of Spatial Terminology

Already in the 1990s, right-wing politicians started to incite radical nationalist sentiments in the region, in opposition to European transnationalism. Although such views were hard to discern in the exhilaration of accessions to the European Union, the high social price of the transition’s neoliberal methods, among other

factors, facilitated the growth of nationalist-populist movements. By the 2010s, nationalist parties and coalitions were routinely disrupting earlier political discourses of a shared past and present east of the former Iron Curtain, stoking “restorative nostalgia” for a glorious, often medieval, past (Boym 30).⁹ Authoritarianism gained political power across the region, resulting in parliamentary representation and in some cases a majority for far-right parties. The growth of anti-pluralist populism has been enabled by “the betrayal of the intellectuals” and their transformation into extremist ideologues (Applebaum 17),¹⁰ disseminating old fears and hatreds like anti-Semitism, as well as new ones, like anti-migration sentiments. Scapegoating, divisiveness, and “the medium-sized lie” or the cult of post-factuality in a hyperconnected world have become major tools in upholding the power of authoritarian, sometimes Moscow-supported, parties (e.g. FIDESZ in Hungary, Ataka and later Vazrazhdane [Revival] in Bulgaria, Ľudová strana naše Slovensko [People’s Party Our Slovakia] and Smer [Direction] in Slovakia, PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] in Poland).

The rise of authoritarian populism after the end of the Cold War world order is part of a larger, bleaker picture, of which political theorists have warned. Rather than Fukuyama’s final victory of liberalism, Ken Jowitt predicted a “surge of anger” in the wake of the “predictable failure (in most cases) of the market and [of] electoral democracy to produce sovereign, productive, equitable nations in the greater part of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union.” He cautioned of “a worldwide conflict between liberally oriented ‘civics’ and insular ‘ethnics’,” directly challenging the values of liberal democracy (Jowitt 20). Most disturbingly, Jowitt envisioned the redrawing of borders and forced reshaping of identities in a “time rife with dystopian, mutated and unpredictable regimes,” with Europe as “the epicenter of the world disorder” (Krastev 15).

In the face of such an uncertain future, the language used by intellectual and academic circles ought to be a corrective to the centrifugal forces of populism and nationalism. Furthermore, the spatial terminology and focus that we choose for our interpretative work will doubtlessly inform the development of critical methodologies. While national Shakespeare studies are absolutely essential for developing the field, without awareness of a wider transnational context, they run the risk of being appropriated by nationalistic ideologies. In this context, the transnational project presented in this special issue is a timely effort to recontextualize the research of individual national traditions of adapting Shakespeare as part of a larger investigation of “reciprocal cultural dependencies” (Skrodzka 12) and the mutual translatability of shared experiences.

⁹ Anne Applebaum tracked the road to authoritarianism in Poland and Hungary between 1999 and 2019 in *The Twilight of Democracy* (2020).

¹⁰ Applebaum points out that the notion was introduced in Julien Benda’s *La trahison des clercs*, 1929.

Perhaps we can recoup the cultural weight of *Eastern Europe* as an autonomous mesoregion with a cultural tradition that speaks important truths to the world. Or we can reverse the word order of the term and introduce the neologism *Europeast*, foregrounding the Europeaness of the region. Yet another option might be to choose Jenő Szűcs's term *East-Central Europe*, heeding to Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's argument that this "is no geographical or political given," rather, it is an *imagined community*, "constructed out of linguistic, religious, and ethnic elements" whose grouping is historically contingent (18). The hope in using this spatial term (or its close correlative *East-Centre Europe*, intended to tip Europe's centre eastward conceptually), is that it will contribute to the continued self-examination and reinvention of the region as "a zone of literary interfaces" (Drace-Francis 363), a generator of creative ideas and collaboration, rather than "an epicenter of disorder."

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