Даниел ЦИТИРИГА (Университет „Овидий" – Констанца, Румъния)
Daniel CITIRIGA ("Ovidius" University of Constanţa, Romania)

ROMANIAN CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF CENTRAL EUROPE

РУМЪНСКИТЕ КУЛТУРНИ ПРЕДСТАВИ ЗА ЦЕНТРАЛНА ЕВРОПА

The article presents several opinions of outstanding European scholars on the debate about the regional borders in Europe and especially about the dimensions of Central Europe. They insist on cultural and social factors for defining a region, posed geography vs culture and claiming that a region is a more cultural and social construct. It is again a search for the Romanian identity and its place in Europe. The study illustrates the fluidity and flexibility of the borders.

Keywords: Romania, Central Europe.

At the end of the 1970s, but especially in the 1980s, an older conceptual anxiety related to the existence / inexistence of Central Europe returns among the intellectual elite. The most important name is that of the Czech writer Milan Kundera who, in 1983 started a fascinating debate on reviewing the concept of Central Europe (Kundera 1983)[1]. Starting from the "geographic Europe" which extends from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains, Kundera identifies the two parts established on the religious criterion, the Catholic Europe and the Orthodox Europe. At the same time he highlights the peculiarity, which "several nations that had always considered they to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East" were obliged to experience beginning with 1945. Therefore, three different cases appear: "that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe and, the most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the canter – culturally in the West and politically in the East" (Kundera 1983).

Central Europe ... from Romania

Romanian researchers have not been so keen on defining Central Europe or, to put it better, they avoided it for a good period of time. As Adriana Babeți remarked in *Foreword* to one of the most important volumes that appeared in Romania related to this theme, for most of the Romanian intellectuals "Central Europe is a theoretical reflection theme (especially when discussing the cultural dimension of the issue) only sporadic" (Babaeti 1997: 7). Until the publication of the volume entitled *Europa Centrală. Nevroze, dileme, utopia [Central Europe. Neurosis, Dilemma, Utopia]* in 2007, the Romanian intellectual class seem either not interested, or engaged in affirmations, such as those launched by protochronists. According to their viewpoint intensely sustained in the 1980s by sociologist Achim Mihu, Central Europe is nothing else but the revigoration of Hungarian irredentism, "a mythical and poetical scenario manipulated by malefic revisionist forces" (Tismaneanu 1998: 87). In such conditions, it is obvious that the mental barrier instituted at the beginning of the 90s is related to the ideological and political reflections, which perceive Central Europe as a taboo. The interest in the existence of such a region is unhesitatingly associated with the uncertainty of an imperial nostalgia, Mircea Mihăieş remarked (Mihaesh 2004).

However, it is not by accident that an approach to initiating a dialogue concerning Central Europe is made by a writer of Romanian origin, who lives outside Romania. Eugène Ionesco, in the context of publication, distribution, and comments on the well-known article written by Milan Kundera, publishes in 1985 a text dedicated to a possible Central-European confederation. "Being of Romanian origin, Ionesco says, I have always thought, together with other people, that the bloody division which separated Transylvania, Romania, and Hungary may have been the origin of the dreadful conflict and also led to the fall of the Federal Empire. [...] And here I am dreaming of an equitable equilibrium that considers all differences, customs and traditions that are more or less alike in a strange manner. This would be the beginning of a balanced confederation in Mitteleurope, where every person would be different and would have yet the possibility to live together with the others" (Ionesco 1998: 254-255). In the opinion of the same Romanian playwright, "the confederation of a young Mitteleurope" would be made not only of Austria, Hungary, and Romania, but also of Croatia and Czechoslovakia, the individual governments being autonomous while the king, the emperor, or the president would only be an "arbitrator master". For Ionesco, this interpretation would have represented "our spiritual universe and our indispensable force" (Ionesco 1998: 254-255).

Most of the times the attempts at defining Central Europe appear in the context of disputing the membership to the Central-Europe or the Balkans. This reflex is also found in the inter-war period. Emil Cioran, born in Rasinari, a village near Sibiu, in Austro-Hungary, gives a disagreeable verdict to the Balkan in his book *Schimbarea la faţă a României [The Transfiguration of Romania]*, published in 1936: "What could we learn from the obscure tradition of this world corner? Poor people striving to become something, and the generations following them haven't realized anything! Turkish imperialism represents a history disgrace, being the spirit's negative reverse. A country that conquered so much left nothing behind but desolation and darkness. The feeble-minded power of Turkey is responsible, in front of the history tribunal, for the obscurity of this human region" (Cioran 1990: 95-96).

Soon after the fall of the communist system, conceptual and political themes have been frequently discussed, the Romanian approach being evidenced by its dichotomist and antinomian character. Polish, Czechs and Hungarians do not have doubts regarding their belonging to the Central Europe, this being an impossible dilemma for the members of Visegard Group. At the same time, a part of Romanian writers, preoccupied by this discussion, do not only have doubts but also bring arguments regarding the reasons for which they do not belong to it. In this context, it is easy to notice a reflection of personal vanity coming from the space of the former Habsburg Empire, in the opposition to Dimbovita "Balkanism". Practically, these different positions show some conceptual profiles, out of which we can distinguish *the Central European Romanian,* embodied by Ioan Aurel Pop*, the Central-European Transilvanian,* represented by the historian Sorin Mitu from Cluj, *the Balkan Bucharest man*, in the person of Alexandru Paleologu, whose name obliges him to look towards Constantinople, and less towards Vienna, and last but not least *the Balkan and Central European Bucharest man,* described by Andrei Pleşu in a vision of bacchic geopolitics.

At the end of a study dedicated to the historic evolution of Central Europe, Ioan Aurel Pop highlights that this name does not represent a precisely delimited geographic entity,

admitting on the other hand that it is an entity of civilization, based on the common faith of nations, which constitute it. Roughly speaking, the aforementioned historian establishes the borders of Central Europe between the southern extremity of the Baltic Sea and the northern part of the Adriatic Sea, as well as the Western coast of the Black Sea. Secondly, as the region was not homogenous from an ethical and confessional point of view "frequently faced the painful experience of denationalization and forced religious unity, which did not yield any fruitful, but separated nations and attempted unsuccessfully to destroy the region specificity". As regards the Dual Monarchy as the outcome of the combination of the two secular heritage, Hungarian and Austrian, Ioan Aurel-Pop considers that "a hybrid, anachronic, and ephemeral solution was born (1867–1918), with nostalgic prolongation in some domains until nowadays" (Pop 2001: 348). The originality note may be found in the speech of the author mentioned above, especially in the discussion related to the existence of some viable unity models in the past, and the confessional belonging of the population in Central Europe. In this sense, he underlines that "the tendencies to occupy some parts in Central Europe and to attack them to the West or to the East were not successful. Attaching medieval Hungary and Poland to the Western Catholic side was made at the price of ignoring millions of Orthodox within these kingdoms […] The Middle Ages from which comes the Hungarian solution of "unification" and "integration" of Central Europe, a solution prolonged with slight cosmetizations, until 1918, ignored notions such as social equity, democracy, suzerainty, and vassalage. These principles had existed for hundreds of years and then became anachronic. Even federative solutions, experimented in the 19th and 20th centuries and formally modernized were not accepted anymore after 1989, the national principle being proffered" (Pop 2001: 349). Regarding the theories about the historical division between the Catholic and Protestant worlds on one side, and the Orthodox world, on the other side, a division which give rise to break that divides nations, Ioan Aurel-Pop considers that "they only revive hypotheses and solutions contradicted by reality". "Those who imagine that being Lutheran in Riga, Catholic in Krakow, Baptist in Brno, on the one hand, and Orthodox in Iași, Lvov or Athens, on the other hand, at the end of the second millennium are wrong", Pop concludes (Pop 2001: 350).

From the same perspective of analyzing the symbolic geography, Sorin Mitu discovers the origins of Middle Europe in the phase of Western expansion sustained in the 9th and 13th centuries. According to this author, the region, which will be named Central Europe only in the 19th century, would occupy exactly this territory, as a result of the Western Europe expansion (later called Catholic) between 800 and 1200. "It is about the territories situated between the Eastern limit of the Carolingian Empire (Elba and Leitha) and the maximum limit of Hungarian, Polish and Teutonic Order expansion towards the Eastern side, respectively the Transylvanian Carpathians, the Western side of the Ukraine and Belarus and the Baltic countries area" (Mitu 2008:62). In the same train of thoughts, Mitu highlights that Hungary, Poland and the Baltic region are territories situated at the frontier of Catholicism, areas where they meet Orthodox religion and manifest numerous influences and reciprocal interferences. From the author's perspective, "these frontiers were always moving. This was very visible, for example in today's Romanian territory. Formally integrated in *Occidens* by its belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom, Transylvania is also marked by an Orthodox component, considered extremely

important from the Romanian people perspective. After 1918, by integrating Transylvania in the majority Orthodox Kingdom of Romania, Transylvania was administratively moved from one region to another: from Central Europe, oriented towards Vienna, it aimed towards the Eastern Europe that navigate around Moscow, as well as towards the Balkan penetrated by the slowness of Oriental Istanbul. On the other hand though, Sorin Mitu highlights, if we look at the confessional structure of Transylvania in 1918, we will notice that the representatives of the Catholic and Protestant confessions, either Lutheran German, Calvin Hungarian or Catholic Greek Romanian, outnumbered the Orthodox faithful" (Mitu 2008: 66).

Totally different is the colloquial approach, such as the one sustained by Alexandru Paleologu, who does not use scientific and historiographic instruments. He often chooses in his works to assume the Balkan side of the Romanian people. *"Are we a Balkan country or a Central-European country?,* he asks himself. *It is evident that Transylvania is Central-European. We cannot deny that the presence of German and Hungarian people gave us certain inductions, certain generally positive influences. It is true that Wallachia suffered powerful inductions, especially Balkan ones [...] Actually, we, Romanians, are not Balkan for the good reason that we belong to the North of the Danube. But fortunately we do have strong and old Balkan inductions from which results our Wallachian spirit, mainly – all salt and all pepper, discreetness, alertness, and all this extraordinary power of intellectual metabolism"* (Paleologu 2009: 121). As regards "our structure as a unified nation", Paleologu considers that "if we distinguish in this analysis between what is Central-European and what is Balkan on the Romanian territory we will finally lose Transylvania. In fact, such thinking would lead to it. However, Transylvania is not Balkan but Romanian" (Paleologu 2009: 122). Meanwhile, the author stresses the cultural disagreement between Transylvania and the Old Empire doesn't exist anymore, and those who would like to evoke it should consider that it is "an unjustified nostalgia and will not be catchy any longer. It is a feeling of superiority which people in Transylvania feel towards people in the kingdom, considering that they belonged to an Imperial sphere as they have a Viennese education, they are not tale-bearing and story-tellers like us, the people in the kingdom; the coffee is also different. I like both Central-European and Turkish-like coffee-shops. And this is not an alternative", concludes the writer (Paleologu 2009: 123).

And if for Alexandru Paleologu the coffee-shop is defining, for Andrei Pleşu Central Europe cannot be separated from *spritzer*, obviously in an essayist's vision, not a historian's one. "Nothing more Central-European than the diaphanous vitality of such a mixture. Central Europe is definitely the climax of mixed condition, the euphoria of combination: multinational, multicultural, junction of Paradise and Apocalypse, source but also victim of the two wars, joyful and melancholic, bourgeois and absurd, Central Europe is the spritzer of Europe, its convivial "battery". Intensified water and diluted alcohol, the spritzer is actually "coincidentia oppositorum" in the boulevard variant. Similar to it, "Mitteleuropa" is good-natured place of contrasts, of all reconciliations, of the equivocality, of the compromise. Nowhere else can we find different worlds so willing to agree, as they do here" (Plesu 2005: 248-253).

By an original approach, Andrei Pleşu offers some explanations for the powerful assertion of "non-belongingness syndrome" related to the Romanian international politics.

"Balkanized people are complacent in the native picturesque, they want to turn their nickname into fame and suggest that our historical mission is that of "regional leaders". The "European idea" was brought into existence in the Balkans, and the Balkan idea was given its Parisian halo in Bucharest. On the contrary, the others argue that strategically and patriotically we should position ourselves closer to the West. "You are not in the place you actually are, but in the place where you aspire to be". Therefore, real geography becomes as relative as it can be [...]. The syndrome of non-belongingness, which I have mentioned has a unique advantage: it may justify all failures. When things do not happen according to plan, the location is to be blamed" (Plesu 2005). Starting from these premises and the old dispute the Balkans *vs* Central Europe, the author remarks, not without irony, that "the mythology of Central Europe is, in many respects, for Romania, an additional source of frustration. Excluded from Western Europe, at least temporarily, here we are, discovering a new territory of exclusion. Many authors who analytically ponder over the "Mitteleuropa" concept forget to place us on the map of their preoccupations. They talk about Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, which represent a sort of exclusive club (the "Visegrad group"), while the Wallachian territory is only for some of them related to the same area. They would rather say that we are an average term between Middle and Balkan Europe" (Plesu 2005). The novelty of Andrei Plesu's analysis resides of finding the connection between Romanian and Central-European people. Something that would be not only undeniable but also present in our blood and capable of bestowing some certificates of excellence on us. *The spritzer* is a drink which appeared somewhere in Austria, and found in accordance with Plesu's opinion "remarkable and incorruptible servants right in the Balkan Kingdom". From here also results the construction that would sustain direct connections and the author's conclusion according to which if in the philosophy of Central Europe everything may be postponed – drunkenness, decision, happiness and history – nobody can doubt that we really belong to this space (Plesu 2005).

As regards the Central and Eastern Europe of the 19th century, Lucian Boia sees in them "the field of kingdoms, multi-ethnic conglomerates, structures that could have led (but it was not the case) to a multinational model, different from the Western type of nation. [...] In a great part of this space, the rule was the ethnic conglomeration. In order to generate homogenous territories, clever off cuts should have been imagined, but they would not have been efficient enough to fully connect or separate ethnic and linguistic communities. [...] In these areas, national ideology took the restrictive form of a conflict between ethnic groups and cultures. On one side, there was the resistance of conquered territories and on the other side the effort of dominant forces to impose a national model on such territories" (Boia 2007: 170-171). As regards Romania, the title of one of his books: *România, tară de frontieră a Europei [Romania, Frontier Country of Europe]* (Boia 2002) is relevant for the position of the same historian.

As a conclusion, we highlight the opinion of Corina Ciocârlie, who notices that "while a good part of Western culture seems to be marked forever by the rigidity of *either-or* […], the Mitteleuropa of the outskirts proves to be just like the Romanian "being" described by Noica in the terms of Pascal "smoother, more accessible and more rational"; it seems "not like an absolute centre, which would be present everywhere, and the confines of which would

not be found anywhere", but, on the contrary, "like a circumference that is everywhere, while its centre cannot be found anywhere" (Ciocarlie 2010: 179-180).

NOTES

[1] The article was translated in English in "The New York Review of Books", of April 26, 1984. For the Romanian version, please see *Tragedia Europei Centrale [The Tragedy of Central Europe],* in „Europa Centrala. Nevroze…" [*Central Europe. Neurosis...]*, pp. 221-235.

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