

Geopolitical concepts of Central Europe and current reality: language perspective

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Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of the theory of geopolitical understanding of Central Europe, basing on the evaluation of region's contemporary situation and supported by the empirical data. The main research question is the following: is it possible in recent situation to still speak of Central Europe as a geopolitical region? The article is focused on the three traditional geopolitical concepts of Central Europe considered from the perspective of the current role of Germany as a traditional communication factor in this region. First, the idea of Mitteleuropa is analysed. Then, the perspectives of the Visegrad, concept of Austria-Hungary legacy and finally CENTROPE are closely viewed. Analysis is mostly based on empirical data available in the official documents published by EU institutions as well as official national statistical data of Central European countries. Adopted research method is a combination of historical, political geography and social linguistics approaches to the topic. The concept of Central Europe with its centre in the German-speaking countries may be currently economically and politically significant, especially from a pan-European perspective, however German linguistic hegemony is not present in any of the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the Visegrad Group today does not include all regions and states and German is not considered there as the main language of communication.

Keywords: Central Europe, geopolitical region, idea of Mitteleuropa, idea of Visegrad, concept of Austria-Hungary legacy, CENTROPE, political identity, multilingualism.

Koncepcje geopolityczne Europy Środkowej a współczesna rzeczywistość: perspektywa językowa

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia krytyczną analizę teorii geopolitycznego rozumienia Europy Środkowej weryfikowaną na podstawie współczesnej sytuacji i popartą danymi empirycznymi. Główne pytanie badawcze brzmi: czy w obecnej sytuacji można nadal mówić o Europie Środkowej jako regionie geopolitycznym? W artykule przyjrzymy się trzem tradycyjnym koncepcjom geopolitycznym Europy Środkowej z perspektywy obecnej roli Niemiec jako tradycyjnego czynnika komunikacyjnego tego regionu. Najpierw przeanalizowano koncepcję Mitteleuropy. Następnie dokonano analizy z perspektywy koncepcji Wyszehradu, spuścizny Austro-Węgier i ostatecznie CENTROPE. Analiza opiera

się głównie na danych empirycznych pochodzących z oficjalnych dokumentów publikowanych przez instytucje UE lub przez oficjalne krajowe urzędy statystyczne z państw Europy Środkowej. Przyjęta metoda badawcza to połączenie historycznego, polityczno-geograficznego i społeczno-lingwistycznego podejścia do tematu. Koncepcja Europy Środkowej ze swoim centrum w krajach niemieckojęzycznych może być obecnie bardzo istotna gospodarczo i politycznie z perspektywy paneuropejskiej, ale niemiecka dominacja językowa nie występuje na żadnym obszarze sąsiadującym z tymi krajami. Ponadto Grupa Wyszehradzka nie obejmuje dziś wszystkich regionów i państw, a język niemiecki nie jest uważany za główny język komunikacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Europa Środkowa, region geopolityczny, koncepcja Mitteleuropy, koncepcja Wyszehradu, spuścizna Austro-Węgier, CENTROPE, tożsamość polityczna, wielojęzyczność.

The aim of this study is an attempt to analyse the existing situation in Central Europe, especially in terms of whether and to what extent it corresponds to traditional geopolitical concepts of understanding Central Europe. The emphasis will be placed on the question of existence of a Central European identity, as the study of the geopolitical region cannot be limited only to the issue of inter-state regional cooperation but it must also seek to analyse deeper aspects leading to regional identity, such as the factors influencing the region's political culture. The perspective of the analysis of the current situation will be the role of language in Central Europe as a result of language policies and language behaviour in Central European countries. The current situation will be compared with the role of language as it was determined at the time of the emergence of traditional geopolitical concepts of Central Europe.

There are not very many topics like Central Europe that are so often emphasised and overlooked or even questioned (for example, see: Okey 1992; Moskalewicz, Przybylski 2017). At the same time, it is a topic that is addressed by experts in a number of fields. Physical, political and cultural geography, political science and international relations, history and art history, literary science and musicology, sociology and anthropology. Different views on this topic are very often associated with the national, ethnic, cultural or religious background of individual authors.

An art historian may remind us of the similarity of rural Baroque churches, but is that enough to clearly define Central Europe? An architect may point out the similarity of train stations in small towns of Central Europe, but is this a sufficient factor to differentiate Central Europe from other parts of the continent? There is no need to confirm the significance of Central European, mostly Jewish authors of the first half of the 20th century, for world literature, but is this a sufficient factor for a political scientist to acknowledge the existence of Central Europe as an independent region? It is certain that Viennese cuisine is more Central European than Austrian, influenced by Czech or Hungarian cuisine. Again, it is a factor that says something but does not pose a clear answer to the existence of Central Europe.

For a political geographer, the question of the existence of Central Europe is rather an issue of historical political geography. All major supranational political bodies in Central Europe are a thing of the past. The Polish-Lithuanian Union as well as the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy have all disappeared.

All in all, Central Europe seems to be a topic that is most suitable for historians, especially those dealing with the 19th and 20th century. There are many topics regarding this period. Of these, I would mention the topic of the geopolitical significance of Austria after the Napoleonic wars as a creator of balance of the geopolitical axis in continental Europe between East (Russia) and West (France), or the topic of Austro-Slavism and the importance of Austria for small nations of Central Europe. Other important topics are the efforts to create Mitteleuropa in the first half of the 20th century as an instrument of German dominance throughout Europe, the Polish-Czechoslovak Confederation Plan during the Second World War as a bridge between East and West, or the role of Visegrad states in the first decade following the end of the Cold War, when they were politically, economically and internationally understood, unlike other post-Communist areas, as a stable region fully prepared for the participation in NATO and the European Union.

Nevertheless, for political scientists and experts in international relations, the three main geopolitical concepts of understanding Central Europe remain so important that they are still worth considering. One is the concept of Central Europe with Germany as its central point, the other is the concept of Central Europe as a space between German-speaking countries and Eastern Slavic nations, and the third concept is the issue of the persistence of bonds created by centuries of Habsburg Monarchy.

Again, it is possible to view the concepts from many angles. Perhaps the most important view is the analysis of the political and economic role these Central European concepts can play in the overall development of the European Union. The aim of this study is thus a not very frequent perspective of looking at this topic in terms of language as a possible unifying aspect in the contemporary understanding of Central Europe. The role of languages in each of these three main concepts is always a little different.

Theoretical approach

Although the article is based on an analysis of empirical data, because of language perspective of the topic an analysis is constructed on contemporary sociolinguistic theories. Description of monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism in Central Europe follows theories of Bernard Spolsky (Spolsky 2004) as well as an application of Abram de Swaan's theory of the political economy of language constellations and language communication in that area of Europe (de Swaan 2001). Comparison between language and ethnicity and ethnicity and state in Central Europe is based on theories of Roman Szul (Szul 2009). Concept of linguistic transnational identity is based on author's previous research (Hnízdo 2008).

Three main geopolitical concepts of Central Europe

In the concept of Central Europe with Germany as the political, economic and cultural center, the role of German language is dominant. In areas where speakers of other languages predominate but can be still included in the concept of Central Europe, German

should be the language of wider communication (German as a communication tool in a conversation with a native German speaker and somebody whose first language is different), as well as a *lingua franca* (the language of communication between speakers of other languages). In this concept, German should become the second language for non-native Central European speakers, which would also be the language of instruction at least at some level of their schooling or further study, and also the language used on a nearly daily basis at work or in public.

With the exception of those who understand Central Europe as an area of predominantly German speaking countries, the proponents of the two remaining concepts agree that Central Europe must be seen as a transnational region and, therefore, as a bilingual or multilingual environment. Hence, these concepts are very often placed against the concept of the national state, which is mainly associated with monolingualism, at least in the European environment, with a few exceptions.

In the concept of Central Europe as a space between German speaking states and Eastern Slavic speakers, the common language of communication has never played a significant role. The main reason is that these concepts have always been based on inter-state cooperation among the countries in the region. Traditionally, French has played the role of common communication language here for two main reasons. This concept would appear mainly in the second half of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century when French was the language of diplomacy and thus of politicians and intellectuals from this region. The second reason was the effort of the political and cultural elite of these states to stand up to German cultural, economic and political dominance, and France at that time, and especially after the First World War, appeared as a natural ally in this effort.

The third concept of Central Europe, which is geographically connected with the Habsburg Monarchy, is inherently transnational, but unlike the preceding concept this one assumes interconnectedness and mutual contacts among people from this region. To do this, it is necessary to have a common language of mutual communication. In this concept, this role has traditionally been played by German.

The aim of this study is to analyse the extent to which these concepts are currently associated with monolingualism, bilingualism or multilingualism. The second question is whether German, which has traditionally played the role of *lingua franca* of Central Europe, is still or at least partially in this position, or whether it is possible that the role has been assumed by English, which, however, cannot ever be perceived as the language associated only with the Central European region. The study is based on a historical comparison where these three concepts, which were emerging mainly during the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, will be compared with today's reality in terms of their coincidence or difference. In this comparison, emphasis will be placed on the role of language in all three concepts. The main measure of the current existence of these three concepts will be the question of continuity of the traditional role of language in these concepts in today's reality. The effort to geographically define Central Europe in the context of these three concepts and compare it with the geographical form that

was given to them as they emerged will be also based on this point of view. Surveys on the language skills of Central Europe's population in the context of the entire continental Europe will serve as source material. The key source is the latest published large survey conducted by Eurobarometer in 2012 (*Europeans and their languages* 2014).

Concept of Mitteleuropa

The concept of Central Europe with Germany at its center is connected mainly with German nationalism since the end of the 19th century. It was associated with the understanding of Germany in the so-called Greater Germany presentation, which included all historical countries of the Holy Roman Empire, i.e. not only Germany but also Austria, the Czech lands and today's territory of Slovenia. This form of Germany, then in the concept of Mitteleuropa as presented by Friedrich Naumann during the First World War, was to be the economically and culturally dominant force of the whole of Europe (Naumann 1915). Of course, the results of the war did not make it possible to implement this geopolitical concept. Only the wartime success of Nazi Germany in the first years of the Second World War returned the concept to the map of Europe. The occupation of the Czech lands in March 1939, defeat of Poland in the autumn of the same year, German gains in Slovenia after the defeat of Yugoslavia in 1941 and direct annexation of parts of Fascist Italy to the German Reich in 1943 created the political and geographical form of the Mitteleuropa concept. The tragic paradox, however, was the almost complete liquidation of Jewish communities in the region. The communities that traditionally brought about the most significant manifestations of Central Europeanism of preceding decades in literature, in other fields of art or in philosophy and science.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, the loss of the so-called Eastern territories, the occupation of Germany, its division into two states, West Germany's inclination to cooperate with France and East Germany's position as an important part of the Soviet bloc all confirmed the demise of Central Europe with Germany at its center. Only the end of the Cold War in Europe returned this concept into geopolitical thinking, but in completely different conditions, especially ideological and political, with Germany as a democratic state. The unification of Germany in 1990 again moved this state back more to Central Europe, thus further increasing its significant economic power in Europe, as West Germany has been the strongest economy in democratic Europe since the 1960s. Germany has become not only economically but also politically the leading state of the entire European Union (Rupnik 2019). The first more independent expression of foreign policy of a unified Germany was its progress in the Yugoslav crisis in the first half of the 1990s, when its clear support for the new states, especially for Slovenia and Croatia, was visibly different from France's hesitant stance.

Another factor confirming Germany's new geopolitical role after the end of the Cold War was Austria. During the Cold War, its population increasingly shifted from German identity to Austrian identity, so at the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain, only 6% of Austrians considered themselves Germans. Compared to the beginning of the 20th century,