

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE "CENTRAL EUROPEAN IDENTITY OF CROATIA"

House of Europe, Zagreb, Croatia, 11 June 2015

Organizers: Institute for European and Globalization Studies (Zagreb), Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (Zagreb), Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (Vienna), "Srednja Europa" publishing house (Zagreb), Jean Monnet Chair in EU Political Studies – University of Zagreb

The term "Central Europe" (German: Mitteleuropa) has already been present in European political, cultural and intellectual discourse for over two centuries. It is often linked to German influence, which manifested itself on a cultural, political and economic level. The most important intellectuals relevant to the development of the concept were Friedrich List (1789–1846) and Friedrich Naumann (1789–1846). After the collapse of Austria-Hungary, the idea of Central Europe became the subject of various new interpretations until it faded from the public consciousness after the fall of Nazi Germany and the creation of the Eastern Bloc. However, the concept was revived during the rapid political changes in Europe in the 1990s and linked to the possibility of creating a new Central European identity.

Due to its political and cultural as well as its economic history, Croatia is usually counted among the Central European countries, albeit a "peripheral" one. However, after Yugoslavia disintegrated Croatia and joined the EU in 2013, it began to forge closer links with the countries of Central Europe. Despite being only sparsely present in public discourse except in the context of attempts to distance Croatia from the

"Balkans", the question of the significance of the term "Central Europe" has once again become important for the future of the Croatian state and its inhabitants. Therefore, the goal of this conference was to discuss topics related to the importance of a Central European identity today (especially for Croatia), the role of Central Europe within the EU, and the role of the Visegrád Group (V4). The conference was the first of its kind in Croatia

Anđelko Milardović (Institute for European and Globalization Studies) held the introductory speech, in which he presented the most basic question relevant to the conference's topic: what exactly is Central Europe? Milardović pointed out that almost all definitions agree that Central Europe is a border area i.e. a point where several cultural circles – primarily of Germany and Russia – meet. He also put forth the question of how this concept can be applied to today's cultural and political reality, and outlined the importance of the Visegrád Group within the EU. Milardović claimed that Croatia had an identity that consists of three components: Central European, Mediterranean, and regional ("Balkan"). Thus, this conference and the upcoming one in Split are intended to promote a rethinking of Croatia's position in Central Europe and the Mediterranean (the regional/"Balkan" component already has a significant presence in public discourse).

The conference's first panel was opened by Peter Jordan (Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Vienna). Jordan spoke of the cultural-geographic division of Europe into larger regions for practical purposes, stressing that the criteria for such a division are very complex because regions are essentially fragile and malleable concepts. He pointed out that there are as many as 16 widely-accepted divisions of Central Europe, and only two countries are always considered a part of the region: Austria and the Czech Republic. The mentioned divisions are based on 16 characteristics, the most important of which are: coexistence of Catholicism and Protestantism; influence of German and Jewish culture regardless of the majority population of individual countries; division of power between the nobility, ruler, Church, and towns; free farmers not tied to feudal lords; tradition of local and regional self-government; political and economic orientation towards the continent (not the sea); late industrialization compared to Western Europe, but early compared to Eastern Europe.

Constantin Iordachi (Central European University) spoke about the historical regions of Central Europe and their importance for today's

historical research, provided we understand them as analytical constructs based on common geographic, cultural and political characteristics that reflect the geopolitical conventions of a given period. Iordachi used a broad definition of Central Europe, encompassing the lands which once comprised the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, the Hungarian Kingdom, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He stressed that the "renaissance" of Central Europe in the 1990s is closely linked to joining NATO and the EU, and that these definitions have both an inclusive and an exclusive component; the latter takes the form of labelling eastern neighbours as an oriental (Russian, Balkan) "Other". Iordachi concluded that the division of Europe on an east-west axis is has such a powerful presence precisely because it reflects the division between "enlightened" and "backward" countries, countries where industrialization came early and those where it was delayed, and the countries on each side of the Iron Curtain.

A debate on topics such as the influence of globalization on Central Europe followed, where participants put forth the question whether the EU makes the concept of Central Europe obsolete. There was a general consensus that this is not the case precisely because the concept underwent a renaissance after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. In addition, the Visegrád Group was discussed in the context of Central European cooperation based on common economic interests. The links between identity and political and economic interests, and how they can be combined, were also discussed.

The second panel began with the presentation of Marija Boban (Faculty of Law, Split), who examined the problem of controlling the public awareness of the Central European identity of Croatia. She explained the importance of this identity in the modern information society, which is characterized by digitalization, mobility, and democratization. She spoke of the relationship between universal values and individual cultural identity and suggested several strategies of how to preserve Croatia's cultural identity within the EU. Boban also presented the concept of information space as a battlefield of modern information society, emphasizing that this is where collective identities are developed. She stressed the importance of controlling the body of public knowledge as a component of every national security programme.

The next speaker was Josip Lučev (Faculty of Political Sciences, Zagreb), who spoke of the role of institutions in a country's economy and

society, with an emphasis on exploring alternative models of capitalism. Based on the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) theory of Hall and Gingerich (2009), Lučev presented two basic economic models of the contemporary western world: the coordinated market economy (CME) and the liberal market economy (LME), with a brief reference to a possible third, Mediterranean model. Stating that the CME model is typical for Central European countries, he made a comparison of how these two models react to an economic crisis. He noted that Croatia, uncharacteristically for a CME country, has a weak crisis management system. Lučev expressed the belief that this stems from the specific nature of the Croatian economy, which is characterized by a high percentage of people employed in agriculture, a large part of the economy dependent on tourism (typical for the Mediterranean model), clientelism and corruption.

The main topic of Ivo Lovrić (Centre for Croatian Studies, Zagreb) was the role of Central Europe as a Croatian political domicile. He stressed the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to defining Central Europe since its borders can be defined in many ways. Presenting Croatia as a "place where worlds meet", Lovrić discussed the question of whether a Central European and Balkan identity are mutually exclusive and the "vacuum" that appeared after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, when the term "Balkans" was transformed into a sort of pejorative and was replaced by more "correct" terms such as "Western Balkans" or "the region". Lovrić also questioned to which extent can a region which is defined as a frontier or border region (and which is usually defined by the "great powers" at the expense of "small countries") truly be considered one's domicile.

Janko Bekić (Institute for Development and International Relations) presented arguments for and against why Croatia should seek its future in the Yugosphere (Tim Yudah) or the Habsburgosphere (his own concept). He reflected upon the restoration of relations between the ex-Yugoslav countries after the year 2000, the initiative which lobbied to have these countries accepted into the EU as a "package", and the consequences of Croatia's reserved attitude towards CEFTA. Bekić expressed the belief that, although Croatia could potentially profit from a continuous close cooperation with the ex-Yugoslav countries, he would prefer if Croatia forged closer ties with the Habsburgosphere since it offers a more stable and safer framework than the Yugosphere as well as

greater freedom of movement. He recommended that Croatia join the Visegrád group as soon as possible.

The final presentation of the second panel was held by Bruno Lopandić (Croatian Chamber of Commerce). After presenting an overview of the genesis of the term "Western Balkans", Lopandić spoke of the strategies through which Croatia could integrate itself into the Visegrád Group. The integration of Croatia into the EU naturally resulted in the Croatian economy reorienting itself towards Central Europe. This could of course be very profitable for Croatia, provided the country implements a well thought-out economic strategy on a state level. Lovrić also touched upon the opportunities which would be opened up after Croatia joins the Visegrád Group, primarily regarding energy security and trade with China.

A discussion followed, during which the question about what would have happened had Croatia joined CEFTA at the Thessaloniki Summit was posed. Furthermore, the idea of Croatia always being part of Central Europe was put into question, and there was some discussion on how much effort should Croatia put into retaining its "Yugoslav" market. Finally, two major problems of Croatian society today were discussed: the low consciousness of the general public in Croatia that their country is now part of the EU, and the lack of proper political dialogue as the cause of the under-development of a Croatian cultural identity.

The third panel opened with a presentation by Stevo Đurašković (Faculty of Political Sciences, Zagreb) and involved a comparison of the role of the idea of a Central European identity in the Croatian and Slovakian national integration processes. Based on the fact that Slovakia and Croatia possess certain similarities in their political-historical development and national identity building processes, Đurašković analyzed how concepts related to an identity based on the idea of being a border region between two cultural-political macro-regions (for example Christian Central Europe and the Ottoman Empire, the USSR and Hitler's "New Europe", etc.), present in both countries, reflected on the mentioned processes. Đurašković was also touched upon the influence of Russophilia and pan-Slavism on forming the national identity of Central European countries.

The second and final lecture of this panel was held by Damir Agičić (Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Zagreb). He spoke of the Croatian Central European identity in the past and today, beginning with the

problem of how exactly to define the term "Central Europe" and reflecting on related terms such as "Central-Eastern Europe" etc. He stressed that the division of Europe into eastern and western regions is a relatively recent invention which only became prominent in the 19th century. He spoke about the influence of the Russian element of pan-Slavism on the division into Eastern and Western Europe, with Central Europe as a border area. Agičić next talked about the influence of Central European ideas on the formation of the Croatian national identity and its conflict with the Yugoslav idea, which drew Croatia towards the southeast.

The final debate encompassed the problem of the current lack of consciousness about the importance of the Jewish element of the Central European cultural identity, which was violently cut short by the Holocaust. In addition, there was talk of the differences between the terms "Central Europe" as a historical and cultural term, and "central Europe" as a purely geographic term.

Anđelko Milardović concluded the conference by offering a concise overview of the topics discussed, emphasizing how the lectures and discussions showed how identity was a fluid category, especially in the case of Croatia, whose identity consists of three distinct elements. He pointed out that the concept of the conference was of a minimalist nature, with the goal of discussing new perceptions of the concept of Central Europe following Croatia's accession to the EU and raising the (low) public consciousness of the new cultural-political reality which Croatia is currently part of.

Boris Blažina