

# THE END OF “EAST CENTRAL EUROPE”

# AND THE RETURN OF “EUROPE IN-BETWEEN”?

The changing political implications  
of two geo-historical concepts, 1915–2020

by **Jörg Hackmann**

Political and scholarly debates on European (meso-) regions have returned time and again over the past 100 years. The conceptualizations of Central and Eastern Europe plays a major role in the debates, which affects the Baltic Sea region and Northern Europe as well. These issues have already been addressed many times,<sup>1</sup> but recently, a new development deserves our attention: the launch of the “Three Seas Initiative” in the summer of 2015 by the presidents of Poland and Croatia, comprising 12 EU member states between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas. The idea received international attention during President Trump’s visit to Warsaw in July 2017, when he addressed the members of the initiative’s second summit. Whereas the term “Three Seas” may sound rather unfamiliar to most people in Western and Northern Europe, the Polish term *Trójmorze* resembles a name that had already made its fortune in the short period between the World Wars as *Międzymorze* or *Intermarium*. This notion encompassed the policy of Józef Piłsudski, the state founder of the Second Polish Republic, to establish a Polish state as a leading power in the territories that had previously constituted the western fringes of Tsarist Russia and the eastern parts of the German and Habsburg Empires.

The construction of such a larger region between Germany

and Russia, however, is neither new nor exclusively a Polish project. In Germany, this region “in-between” is being called “Ostmitteleuropa” and in Anglo-Saxon debates “East Central Europe” and “Central and Eastern Europe” are also used. In Poland, Austria and also in the Czech Republic or Czechoslovakia respectively, the attribute “Central” dominates in public and scholarly discourses, omitting the “Eastern” component, which often has a negative connotation, as we know from Larry Wolff’s seminal book.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, a discussion about such diverging or contradicting spatial notions does not contribute to academic hair-splitting but can reveal fundamental differences in the perception of Europe – spatially, politically and ideologically – and thereby contributing to a reflection on recent European challenges.

**BEFORE DELVING INTO** a transnational *Begriffsgeschichte*<sup>3</sup>, I should point out that the notion of “Trójmorze” not only refers to technical issues of supranational infrastructure, as one might read from the Initiative’s documents; it also refers to a political debate on Europe. The launching of this idea originally came from a report by a “Central European” energy lobby group and the Atlantic Council on “Completing Europe”.<sup>4</sup> The reference to “Central Europe” – understood as “a geographic area encompassing the

EU Member States from the Visegrad Four countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Slovenia and Croatia,”<sup>5</sup> places the geopolitical notion of *Trójmorze* in a broader historical and conceptual context. Against this background, the first sections of this essay intend to outline the rise and fall of the concept of East Central Europe, and then turn towards the development of the geo-historical and geopolitical concepts of a Europe “in-between”. Finally, these historical observations will then be related to ongoing political and scholarly debates.

## East Central Europe as a (retrospective) utopia

Since the first cracks appeared in the socialist systems in the Soviet sphere of hegemony in the 1970s, East Central Europe stood for the utopia of a free, peaceful and solidary world. East of the Iron Curtain, mindful observers uncovered relics of a pluricultural world that seemed to have disappeared in the last World War. Against these historical remnants, the national homogeneity and everyday socialist life of the postwar decades seemed grey and gloomy. The utopia that sprang off of the idea of the “center lying eastwards” – the renowned phrase by Karl Schlögel<sup>6</sup> – emerged, on the one hand, from a nostalgic history before modern nationalism and totalitarianism on the territories of the former Habsburg Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and a description of the region’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century “tragedy” (Milan Kundera).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the dissent against the state socialist regimes paved the way for the return of “Mitteleuropa”/“Central Europe”. Such a Central Europe embodied the ideas of socialism with a human face, and of an independent, self-governed and solidary society, which should conclude a new social contract with the “actually existing” Central Committees of the communist parties.<sup>8</sup> After the crushing of the Prague Spring of 1968 and the revolt in Poland’s coastal cities around the “Black Thursday”, on December 17, 1970, Polish and Czechoslovak intellectuals drew the conclusion that the Central Committees could not be removed from power by democratic means under the conditions of Soviet hegemony. The equilibrium between a leadership that could not control all public life and the society that “gave up any attempt [...] to abolish the leadership”, however, did not last long.<sup>9</sup> In Václav Havel’s dictum of the “power of the powerless”, intellectuals in Western Europe, like Jacques Rupnik and John Keane, saw the birth of a new civil society – an idea that was also adopted by their Polish fellow intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> All in all, (East) Central Europe seemed to have returned as a region in the making, in which the impediments of the Cold War would not last forever. These reflections on (East) Central Europe were not based on geopolitical thinking. On the

contrary, the geopolitical dimension – the Soviet domination, in this case – was perceived as an obstacle that was to be overcome by politics from below.<sup>11</sup>

The *annus mirabilis* of 1989 seemingly eliminated the problem of Soviet hegemonic claims: During the carnival of widely peaceful, velvet and singing revolutions, the old regimes showed little resistance or collapsed. Even Moscow’s attempt to stop the revolutions by violence in Lithuania and Latvia finally failed with the defeat of the putschists and the triumph of Boris Yeltsin in August 1991. The image of East Central Europe was now shining in the light from the victorious civil societies. Euphoria was in the air.<sup>12</sup> “Central and Eastern Europe” became a successful example of modernization, democratization and economic transformation, far exceeding the limits of the region. In a sloppy translation, the acronym CEE in German repeatedly became *Mittelosteuropa*,<sup>13</sup> what might be read as a hint of missing focal depth in the historical and cultural perception of the region or as an (un)conscious attempt to push the “east” in the spatial denomination into the background.

## The rise of East Central Europe

At first glance the genesis of the notion of “East Central Europe”, seems to be quite simple: It refers to the eastern parts of Central Europe. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex situation, which has its roots in World War I. Before and also during this war, as shown by Friedrich Naumann’s well-known book, *Mitteleuropa* was the leading notion for describing the space

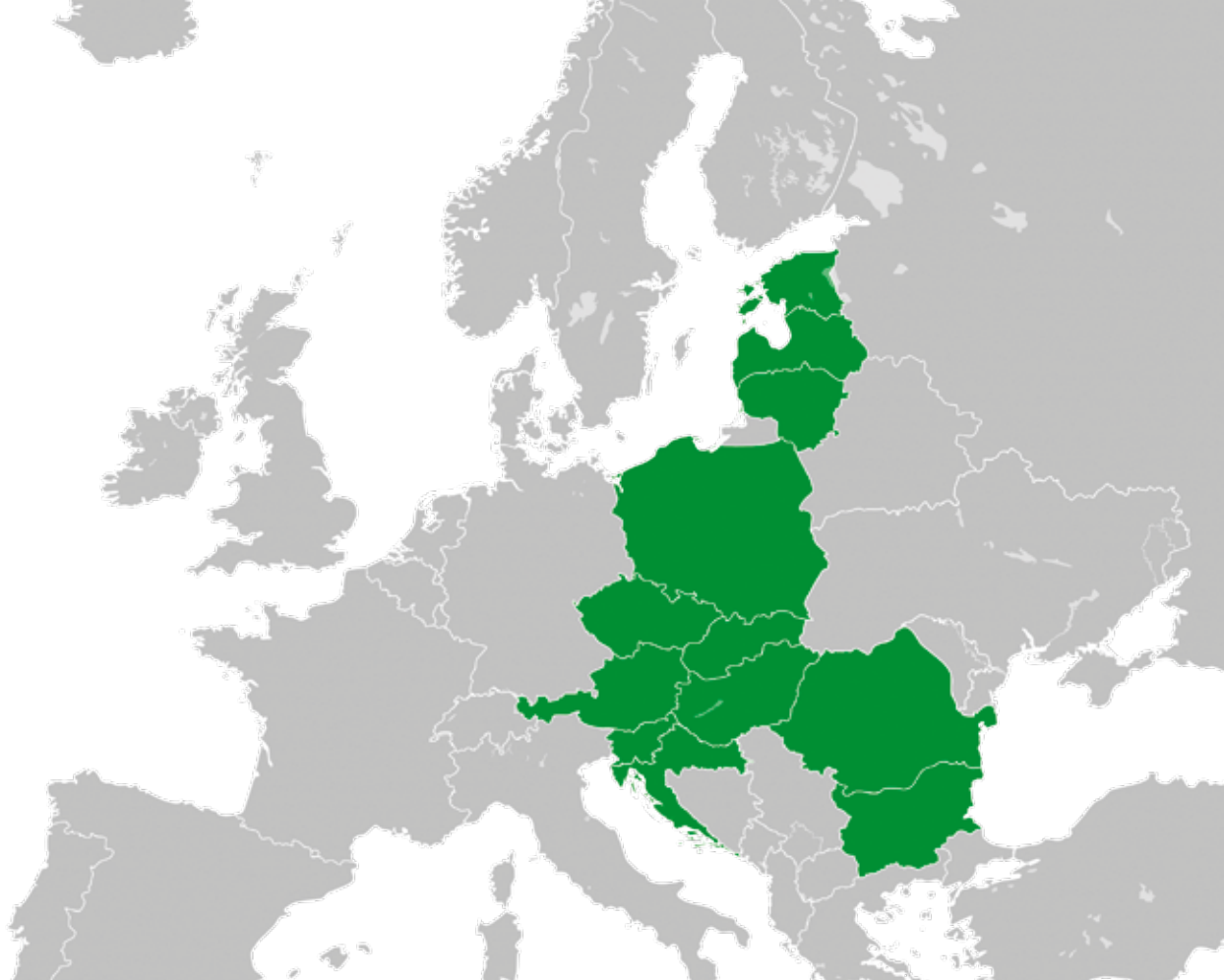
between the West and the East, France and Russia.<sup>14</sup> The term was mainly applied on the political space of Germany and the Habsburg Monarchy, but, due to the German visions during the war, a special and more dynamic focus was placed on the regions to the east of Germany that were, or should, come under the control of the Central Powers. However, these debates, which shall be discussed below, came to an end with the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the *Kaiserreich* in the fall of 1918.

The term *östliches Mitteleuropa* or, since the 1930s, *Ostmitteleuropa*, respectively, which emerged in the German discourse after the war, reflected the postwar situation, as it comprised those regions of *Mitteleuropa* that had become territories of Poland, CSR and Hungary, where – in the German perspective – the traditional German hegemony was now being politically endangered. Against this background, the German influence on East Central Europe was underlined as being fundamental.<sup>15</sup> Besides this German political notion, an international scholarly discourse on Eastern Europe unfolded at the International Historians’ Conventions between 1923 and 1933, not least with contributions by the Polish historian Oskar Halecki.<sup>16</sup> The main outcome was the establishing of a “new” or

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Member states of  
the Three Seas  
Initiative.

PHOTO: JAYCOOP /  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Slavic Europe, as a distinct historical region of Europe that was not identical to Russia.

This debate initially centered around the term *Eastern Europe*, but during the Second World War, “East Central Europe” gained relevance as an international political notion also in the United States. There, East Central Europe (and the Baltic region) were presented as regions that were distinct from Russia, not least due to the writings of the German Jewish exile historian Hans Rothfels, who was an ardent supporter of *Deutschtum* in the region before 1938.<sup>17</sup> The perspective, shaped by Oskar Halecki in American exile, became most influential – he explicitly referred to East Central Europe, which he conceived as the *Borderlands of Western Civilization*.<sup>18</sup> In the spirit of the 1950s, the title was translated into German as *Grenzraum des Abendlandes*.<sup>19</sup> Halecki, however, did not so much present a scenario of the endangered West; his idea was initially to explain to his American (student) readers that the regions east of the Iron Curtain were no *terra incognita* but “shaped all the many peoples who live between Germany and Russia” which, in their cultural and ethnic diversity, are integral parts of the Europe influenced by Roman-Catholic Christianity. Such a perspective was intrinsically connected to a criticism of the empires that suppressed the freedom of the nations of East Central Europe. Following this path, as early as 1946<sup>20</sup> the Hungarian historians István Bibó and then Jenő Szűcs<sup>21</sup> discussed the reasons and consequences of imperial rule in East Central Europe. According to Szűcs’ diagnosis, East Central Europe emerged out of a dilemma as a distinct historical

region of Europe: Under the rule of the great Eastern powers, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the Hohenzollern and Habsburg monarchies, the political and social ties with the West that had existed since the Middle Ages were cut and it was only against this background that East Central Europe emerged as a distinct historical region. Consequently, Szűcs spoke of three regions of Europe – Western, Eastern and East Central, whereas Halecki – more logically – conceived of a dualism in Central Europe and also suggested a “West Central Europe” in his *Limits and Divisions of European History*.<sup>22</sup>

**THE PARALLEL WEST GERMAN** focus on East Central Europe was an elaboration of Halecki’s view, first with the attempt to show that Poland was still and has always been a part of Europe. Second, the historian Klaus Zernack argued that East Central Europe can be identified as a historical region *sui generis*, from the early Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – an idea that had also been developed by Werner Conze.<sup>23</sup>

The Polish debate on East Central Europe also goes back to Halecki’s perspectives. Actually, the Polish term *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia* appeared in underground and exile writings during the Second World War,<sup>24</sup> and occasionally also earlier (see the map on page 36). The term itself has repeatedly raised a critique among Western historians as semantically inaccurate, because it follows the logic of *Mittelosteuropa*, i.e. Central Eastern Europe. However, the term *Wschodnio-środkowa Europa* barely appears in Polish debates. After 1989 it was initially the



Map showing the Polish term *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia* in 1902.

historian Jerzy Kłoczowski with his Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej in Lublin who introduced and maintained the term *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia* in Polish debates.<sup>25</sup> Kłoczowski basically followed Halecki's notion: In spatial terms, *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia* covered the territory of the *Rzeczpospolita Szlachecka*, which he also called "younger Europe". According to Kłoczowski, this term "marks what we today like to call East Central Europe. The core of this Europe is the historical areas connected to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary."<sup>26</sup> In a survey among Polish historians *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia* has also been understood as an object of historiographical and methodological reflections.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, in Polish and in particular in Czech debates, another difference to the German discourse appears: There, the opinion prevails that they are being part of Central Europe, without its Eastern specification. Thus, one may also notice a use of "Central Europe" that is not equivalent to *Mitteleuropa*.<sup>28</sup> In any case, in the debates on Czech history, one may observe an attempt to revive Halecki's notion of "West Central Europe", although apparently without much resonance.<sup>29</sup>

## The return of Europe

The political lesson of these debates was that at no point in time could East Central Europe in its social and cultural structures be separated from Europe and, thus, the "return to Europe" was, if not an undisputed aim, at least the predominant one of the soci-

eties. Politically, this meant that the concerned countries, after 1989, first of all wanted membership in the EU and NATO. Some voices were quick to prognos that an EU accession will be the end of (East) Central Europe. Iver B. Neumann argued that with the integration of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into the EU and NATO, the notion of "Central Europe" had lost its political relevance and could now be transferred to those states like Ukraine or the Baltic States, whose European integration was not yet completed.<sup>30</sup> In a similar way, from a historian's perspective, Wolfgang Schmale stated: "Actually, I consider a term like East Central Europe, which suggests the existence of a particular historical region, to be dispensable", following a previous argument raised by Hugh Seton Watson that there is no such region behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>31</sup>

**IF THE CONDITIONS** for a separate development were no longer there, then a fast adaptation to the West should occur – to its democratic values and its liberal economic order. This "new" Europe indeed seemed to become more Western than the "old" Europe which, with its protagonists Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, declined to participate in the Second Iraq War in 2003, despite the demands of the Bush Jr. administration. When there was no longer an East Central Europe, then regional expertise was no longer required. German experts on Eastern Europe were confronted with the political consequences of this scholarly attitude, when they had to battle with the reproach – like



their Anglo-Saxon colleagues – that they had not foreseen the end of Soviet hegemony. However, one could also understand the integration of those states, in direct neighborhood with Russia, as political added value: The new Eastern member states of the EU, as the assumption goes, would have greater expertise and higher sensibility in their dealings with Russia and the CIS. Initiatives launched by Finland and Poland on a “Northern Dimension” or “Eastern Partnership” within the foreign policy of the EU were based on such a premise. In general, the opinions about the contributions of the new member states to the EU, as well as the impact of the EU on the intellectual climate in those societies, were highly positive. To give two examples: In the anthology *Poland imagines Europe* of 2004, the editor emphatically wrote about Poland:

**The modernization of the country since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its territorial shift towards the West after the Second World War and, finally, the opening that became possible with the gradual ending of the Cold War anchored Poland in the West: the ‘return to Europe’ stopped being only a dream of the elites. It has become a reality, sealed by an unprecedented intensification of contacts at almost all levels and by Poland’s accession to the European Union in May 2004.**<sup>32</sup>

And in a similar way, the first democratically legitimized Prime Minister of Poland after the war, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, explained Poland’s membership application to the Council of Europe in 1990 as follows:

**Back to Europe! This expression is gaining currency these days in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Politicians and economists are speaking of a return. The same applies to members of the cultural world, although it was easier for them to feel they still belonged to Europe: Europe was felt to be their spiritual home, a community of values and traditions. Perhaps the expression ‘back to Europe’ is too feeble to describe the process we are experiencing. One should speak rather of a European renaissance, the rebirth of the Europe which virtually ceased to exist after Yalta.**<sup>33</sup>

The narrative of the “return” followed the logic of Halecki’s, Bibó’s, Szúcs’ and Zernack’s notion of East Central Europe, whose societies were only prevented by force from joining their neighbors in the North, West and South and keeping up with European unification.

## The fall of East Central Europe

This well-designed picture of a new European normalcy received severe cracks during the last decade: The authoritarian

appearance of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the xenophobic reactions to the immigration of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa and the coup-style interventions of the Polish government, directed by Jarosław Kaczyński, into the judicial system and media, which led to the – obviously not correct – reproach of a “Putinisation” of Poland,<sup>34</sup> have given rise to a deep frustration and concern in both politicians and the public among its Western and Northern neighbors. The new Europeans are no longer eager to be guided by the idea, to become quickly and smoothly adapted to the West in political and economic terms.

Actually, the first cracks were already visible right at the start of Poland’s EU membership, with the heavy battles about voting weights in the EU Council, when Jan Maria Rokita proclaimed like a revenant of Tadeusz Reytan *Nice or death* (in 2003).<sup>35</sup> On a general note it could also be added that the enthusiasm for ideas of European unity was much more limited in Poland than among its Western neighbors

after the Second World War. It would be worth discussing in more detail the extent to which a critical attitude is based on historical experiences and path dependencies. The overview by Włodzimierz Borodziej and others on Polish concepts of Europe highlights similar, albeit short-lived trends of support first for the pan-European ideas of Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi in the interwar period, and then for federative plans of East Central Europe within the Anders Army formed in the midst of the Second World War.<sup>36</sup>

## Zwischeneuropa and Intermarium

The distance towards the “return to Europe” among parts of the Polish political and intellectual elites brings us back to alternative notions for the region that have been discussed as (East) Central Europe, thus far. Here, we once again have to go back to World War I. Besides Naumann’s *Mitteleuropa*, which remained bound to traditional political geography, another term comprising a more dynamic concept of German space was coined by the German geographer Albrecht Penck: “Zwischeneuropa” or “Europe in-between”.<sup>37</sup> According to Penck, who had a particular impact on shaping German scholarly perceptions of Eastern Europe, *Zwischeneuropa* was the space between *Vordereuropa* and *Hintereuropa* and “the theatre of actual European history”.<sup>38</sup> *Zwischeneuropa* implied a larger but blurred zone situated between two clearly accentuated regions, i.e. the Atlantic and continental Europe.<sup>39</sup> In the words of the economist and settlement expert Max Sering, “Zwischeneuropa” denoted “the long strip between Central and Eastern Europe” from Finland to Greece,<sup>40</sup> which clearly reveals the conceptual distinction between Central Europe and Europe in-between.

Against this idea of a German dominated space, in the Polish debate, the initially addressed *Międzymorze* / *Intermarium* emerged. At the end of the First World War, it had been defined historically by Halecki and politically by Piłsudski. Halecki spoke in 1918 of a “bridge between the Baltic and the Black Sea”.<sup>41</sup> This

Polish notion first referred to the extension of the plurinational *Rzeczpospolita* of the Jagiellonians and was in clear contrast to Russian-Panslavist ideas and German claims of hegemony over Central Europe. Halecki's historical notion also followed geographer Eugeniusz Romer's depiction of Polish territory which, according to him, was defined by the river systems of Wisła, Niemien / Nemunas, Dźwina / Daugava, Dniestr / Dniester and Dniepr / Dnipro.<sup>42</sup>

**WITH THE RISE** of national-democratic ideas and the authoritarian rule by Józef Piłsudski and his successors after the coup of May 1926, the notion of *Intermarium* did not so much comprise the historical vision of federatively organized national diversity, but of competing claims for hegemony over the small nations which, by the same token, tried to secure their national sovereignty. These ideas were continued by Foreign Minister Józef Beck, who tried to set up an alliance system from Estonia to Turkey which, in addition to "Intermarium", was also promoted as the "Third Europe".<sup>43</sup> Needless to say that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 led to another "solution" for political order in East Central Europe, i.e. the "classical" dominance by Germany and Russia with catastrophic consequences for the peoples of the region in-between. Against this background, plans for a federation were once again discussed, following the same line as after 1918. They were continued by the government in exile and the national wing of the Polish dissent movement in socialist Poland with Leszek Moczulski and Janusz Korwin-Mikke.<sup>44</sup> In his voluminous study on "the beginning of Międzymorze", Moczulski followed the path of classical geopolitics (as well as Braudel's *geohistoire*) and tried to present Poland as a "megaregion" since the Early Middle Ages, with explicit distinction from the German discourse on *Mittleuropa*.<sup>45</sup> After 1989, this geopolitical discourse broadened significantly in both scholarly publications<sup>46</sup> and political debates, particularly since the presidency of the late Lech Kaczyński, who supported the idea of a revived *Intermarium*.<sup>47</sup>

**IF, FROM A CLASSICAL** national-historical perspective, the German *Zwischeneuropa* and the Polish *Intermarium* seem to be completely different notions at first sight, one might also come across entanglements between them. When the German geopolitical discourse during World War I referred to an expanded Central Europe from the White Sea to the Bosphorus as a potential German sphere of influence, the focus of *Zwischeneuropa* after the war slightly changed to the new states, which were also called *Randstaaten*, i.e. "states on the fringe" of the Russian or Soviet Empire.<sup>48</sup> A prominent example of the German debate is the socio-economic study on *Europe in-between and the German future*, by Giselher Wirsing.<sup>49</sup> However, I'm not totally convinced that

many people have read it. Despite the fact that Wirsing became a propagator of NS ideology and a member of the SS (and then an influential journalist after World War Two in West Germany),<sup>50</sup> the book does not simply follow a *völkisch* argumentation. Wirsing focuses not so much on the *Deutschtum* as a cultural and social ferment of the region, as had been the case within the "Deutsche Ostforschung", but rather launches the idea of an "anti-imperial" federation of the small nations together with Germany, because "Europe in-between" constitutes a socio-logically, politically and culturally defined spatial entity with Germany. Wirsing overtly separates this *Zwischeneuropa* from Naumann's *Mittleuropa*.<sup>51</sup> In his analysis of the nation-building processes shaped by peasants and intellectuals, he observed major social processes in the region. This partially sounded like

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the Czechoslovak president's Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's notion of a "New Europe",<sup>52</sup> but with the decisive distinction that Wirsing looked for a strategy to connect these nations to Germany in order to create a political space between the West and the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> In that perspective, on the one hand, his concept was an adaptation of geopolitical ideas like Rudolf Kjellén's.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, Wirsing's spatial focus and his political vision of a federation of the states between the Soviet Union and the

West have parallels to the geostrategic ideas of *Intermarium*. The book on *Zwischeneuropa* by the Austrian-Polish writer Otto Forst de Battaglia may serve as a connecting link: The book's subtitle defines the space "from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea".<sup>55</sup>

## Current debates

At this point, we shall turn from historical debates to current political discourses connected to East Central Europe, *Intermarium* and *Zwischeneuropa*. Here, my thesis is that the turn away from East Central Europe and the turn towards terms of Europe in-between goes along with a turn towards national history before 1939 and, by the same token, away from the framework of Europe. There are, of course, good reasons why the newly acquired or restored statehood after 1918 plays a major place in the collective memory of the East Central European nations. In this context, however, the authoritarian politicians of the interwar period are largely regarded as persons warranting the political order internally as well as externally. In 2017, the political scientist Jan Werner Müller observed a return to the authoritarianisms of the interwar period in Polish and Hungarian politics of history.<sup>56</sup> This point has been frequently repeated and has received a new interpretation linked to the notion of "Caesarism".<sup>57</sup> The consequences of these interwar nationalisms for the national minorities, not least for Jewish citizens, were only of minor relevance and have been largely left out in the notion of an "affirmative patriotism", as Anna Wolff-Powęska has observed.<sup>58</sup>

The problem, however, reaches further, not least in the ques-



ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

tion of a co-responsibility for the Holocaust. National strategies for defending the nation's reputation against such accusations were formed at the turn of the millennium. These strategies attempted to implement national discourses that combined heroism with victimization. In Poland, this discourse provoked macabre debates about the victims of the Smolensk catastrophe who, according to some people, cannot just have died by accident but must have served the fatherland. Regarding the nation state, the sovereignty of the interwar period is not only nostalgia for the national protagonists, but also a phenomenon of post-socialist mentalities. Some of the politicians who made their careers during the years of socialism apparently refer to authoritarian techniques of power, including making use of "kompromat", which was left behind by socialist security.

This approach towards national history also reveals a decisive distinction in the visions of Europe that contributes to misunderstandings between Poland and Western Europe: The political debate in Poland on Europe has no attributes and lacks a positive image of the idea of a "Europe of regions" or of transnational values and aims, which has been requested by Ulrike Guérot and Robert Menasse.<sup>59</sup> If the semantical layer of Europe as an appellative notion<sup>60</sup> is not perceived, it rather appears as a specter of a

new occupation. This conflict is furtherer deepened, as Guérot and Menasse in their fight against nationalism in Europe and for a European democracy also refer to an invented foundational myth of Europe, which should support their fight, thus worsening the intellectual climate of debates about Europe.<sup>61</sup>

**AT THIS POINT**, it becomes clear that the notion of "Intermarium" or "Zwischeneuropa" has received a new dynamic that leads away from the notion of the East Central Europe of the postwar years. After the German and Soviet occupations and the expulsions and forced migrations of the 1940s, the new "Europe in-between" now forms a region of sovereign and ethnically homogenous nation states, which try to take a stand against real or alleged hegemonic claims from the West and the East and their representatives within society – just like after World War I. This "Europe in-between" is not defined by a common political culture with the West, but by national navel-gazing and geopolitics based on that attitude.

A closer analysis of the many publications on "Międzymorze"<sup>62</sup> would easily provide many illustrations.

Against this background it is not astonishing, but nevertheless remarkable that the term *East Central Europe* no longer plays a



major role in the Polish political vocabulary. Its disappearance goes along with turning away from the civil society discourse of the 1980s. In fact, any nostalgia for the civil society discourse seems to be inappropriate, as Jürgen Habermas has already warned: the concept, as a means in the fight against socialist regimes cannot contribute to the formation of political objectives in a democratic society.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the evocation of the self-defense of society, echoing back to the famous Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) of the 1970s with the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), is hardly more than a historical reminiscence.

A major pattern of the perceptions in the societies west of “Europe in-between”, goes in a similar way back to the pre-1989 years: The Eastern Bloc has apparently returned as a loose alliance of states centered around the Visegrád Group, which share a common perspective on the EU, on human rights and parliamentary democracy defined by national interests, although the initial understanding of this group in 1991 went in the opposite direction then striving for a rapid and “full integration with Europe”.<sup>64</sup> At an economic forum in Krynica in the summer of 2016, Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán demanded a cultural “counter-revolution” against Brussels based on nationality and religion.<sup>65</sup> There were arguments implying that the European Union was a successor of the Soviet Union: there were voices, for example, from Daniel Cohn-Bendit, stating that Brexit may serve as a model for those Eastern members states that are unwilling to cooperate with Brussels.<sup>66</sup> The consequences are clearly visible: There is a significant political discourse in East Central European states that focuses first of all on distancing itself from the political system of the European Union. Vice versa the Eastern member states are no longer seen as part of a Western or Central Europe, but an Eastern Europe that contains the notion of othering, already described as a historical phenomenon by Hans Lemberg and Larry Wolff.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusions

No matter how the picture is turned, neither the departure from East Central Europe nor the renewed turn towards *Międzymorze* in the “Three Seas Initiative” has led to rosy perspectives. Whereas the interaction between NS Germany and Stalinism ravaged the center of Europe, the reconstruction of the European space “in-between” among parts of the political elites today follows less an appreciation of the cultural diversity of the region before the destruction but aims at a restitution of alleged national strength, which crystallizes itself as the heroes of the interwar period and the resistance during World War II. In the opposite direction, German and Western politicians again tend to map Poland or Hungary, not to mention Ukraine, in the East and regard them as part of a Europe of minor political relevance. In addition, some German scholars – unintendedly, as I would



Representatives of countries at the 2017 Three Seas Initiative summit.

PHOTO: KRZYSZTOF SITKOWSKI

assume – have recently taken a similar direction in dismissing the term and the notion of Ostmitteleuropa.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, “East Central Europe” no longer appears as a region in which the future structures of a peaceful and solidary European Union will be negotiated. “Europe in-between”, in replacing it, again denotes the space in which old and new conflicts between the interests of bigger and smaller nations collide. Such a foreign policy has already been harshly criticized by Olaf Osica, former director of Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, in early 2015:

**Today – after more than 25 years of Polish political and intellectual struggle with Eastern Europe – it is worth asking oneself: How do you avoid a situation in which the crisis of the East, in all its possible dimensions, begins to spill over to us across the border? Or even worse: When will our current distance from what is happening in the European West cause our gradual slipping to the East?**<sup>69</sup>

Here, one may only hope that Karl Marx<sup>70</sup> was right when he stated that historical events recur again, but the second time as farce, not tragedy. ❌

Jörg Hackmann is Alfred Döblin Professor of East European History University of Szczecin.

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