Redrawing the imagined map of Europe: 
the rise and fall of the “center”

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Abstract

This article explores the assumptions and practices, especially the role of naming, involved in the geopolitical rhetoric promoting a spatial reordering of the European continent using the idea of Central Europe and its German counterpart, Mitteleuropa, during the 1980s and 1990s. Central to this discussion is the role of ideas, such as East and West or the ‘return to Europe,’ in forming an imagined geopolitical map of Europe’s regions. During this period of transition and realignment, the geopolitics of naming played an important role in discussions surrounding military strategies, national identity, political economy, and diplomacy in Europe. Although often framed as a means to overcome Europe’s East–West dichotomy, the idea of a central space in Europe has served primarily to facilitate movement from one region and identity, the East, to another, the West, by challenging the established imagined regional geography of Cold War Europe. In this respect, the idea of Central Europe has proven to be a powerful rhetorical devise in ultimately helping Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians redefine themselves as Western, and ultimately European, and therefore the leading candidates for membership in Western institutions. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Few would dispute that the revolutions of 1989 and the events they precipitated were dramatic. One need only compare a contemporary map of Europe with one produced before 1989. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia have disappeared and numerous new states have appeared in their stead. The European Union (EU) and NATO have both expanded and will likely take on

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additional members in the coming years. Yet these cartographic changes allude to a much deeper cultural and political transition; a transition that has involved the (re)construction of imagined geographies often expressed through popular slogans like the rebirth or rediscovery of Central Europe and the ‘return to Europe’ (see Garton Ash, 1989: 179; Judt, 1990; Ágh, 1991; DiBiasio, 1995; Aniol, Byrnes, & Iankova, 1997; Mach, 1997; Henderson, 1999; Pond, 1999; Wiskie, 1999; Bugge, 2000; Smith, 2000). Shifting perceptions of East, West, and Center in Europe and the role these spatial representations play in defining a national or supranational community are central to this transformation.

This article retraces the geopolitical rhetoric surrounding the reemergence of the idea of Central Europe and its German counterpart, Mitteleuropa, during the 1980s and their subsequent evolution during the 1990s. Why did these terms re-enter scholarly and popular discourse after a nearly forty-year hiatus following Germany’s defeat in the Second World War? How has the end of the Cold War affected perceptions of these regions? Examining the recent history of these ideas as geographical concepts helps to clarify these issues and understand their significance in the contemporary cultural, political, and economic discourses of the region. In particular, this article highlights the importance of language and naming in shaping, contesting, and redrawing the imagined political geography of Europe. Although this geopolitical transition was felt throughout Europe, this article focuses on those key countries, Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, at the center of disparate attempts to redraw this imagined map of East, West, and Center in Europe.

Imagined geographies and critical geopolitics

The term ‘imagined geography’ undoubtedly raises some questions and deserves to be explored before proceeding. An imagined geography refers to ways of perceiving spaces and places, and the relationships between them, as complex sets of cultural and political practices and ideas defined spatially, rather than regarding them as static, discrete territorial units (Said, 1978; Schultz, 1989; Harvey, 1990; Bassin, 1991; Livingstone, 1992; Okey, 1992; Neumann, 1993; Gregory, 1994; Wolff, 1994; Delanty, 1995; Wilson & van der Dussen, 1995; Neumann, 1996; Todorova, 1997; Heffernan, 1998; Mikkel, 1998; Neumann, 1999; Painter, 1999; Smith, 2002). The construction of regions represents more than just objective exercises in spatial analysis and classification. Since they reflect and communicate broad representations of our world views, regional constructs can be approached as “discursive formations, tense constellations of power, knowledge and spatiality” (Gregory, 1995: 29).

In cartography, for example, the direction east can be transformed into ‘the East,’ a mental region conveying specific ideological, cultural, and political connotations (Harley, 1992; Vujakovic, 1992; Wolff, 1994; Henrikson, 1999; Wintle, 1999; Zeigler, 2002). Imagined geographies may even directly contradict accepted geographical facts. Many travelers regard Vienna as ‘Western’ and Prague as ‘Eastern,’ even though Prague lies to the northwest of Vienna. Although one journeys in a westerly direction while traveling from Vienna to Prague, many travelers, especially before 1989, would regard this as a trip into the imagined realm of ‘the East.’
Scholars generally highlight two main factors associated with these imagined geographies. First, these geographies provide a type of spatial shorthand, conveying broad characterizations of cultural and political relationships using an outwardly simple slogan. As social constructions, they are subject to continuous debate and reinterpretation and thus represent important ways in which people selectively organize and communicate their particular perspectives. Second, they are often built around opposing places or regions, such as East and West. Here, an imagined geography can help define a national or regional identity against an outside group.

The role of language, rhetoric, and naming is a critical but often overlooked factor in forming these spatial frameworks and communicating them with others (Tuan, 1991). Place names not only help determine the physical location of a place, they are attempts to characterize and often control the people, society, culture, or politics of that place. It is more than simple disagreements over semantics that motivates disputes about place names. Giving a place a name can be a crucial step in enhancing and legitimizing particular perspectives, assumptions, and practices. In fact, much of the power of naming stems from its ability to conceal that it does indeed represent specific and partial views. This discourse of naming then reflects social and political relations of power and knowledge, in addition to territorial control. The cultural politics of naming has been a popular topic in recent scholarship. Much of this research has investigated strategies deployed to assert or affirm specific identities through naming localized places, such as monuments, streets, towns, or natural features (Robinson, 1989; Berleant-Schiller, 1991; Cohen & Kliot, 1992; Azaryahu, 1996; Berg & Kearns, 1996; Yeoh, 1996; Azaryahu, 1997; Herman, 1999; Raento & Watson, 2000; Withers, 2000; Azaryahu & Golan, 2001). Yet, a similar cultural politics is also evident at a larger scale in the geopolitics of naming. As with the politics of naming local places, the act of naming plays a basic but central role in politicizing space and place at a regional or even global scale.

‘Critical geopolitics’ provides a useful approach for investigating the power of naming in the imagined geography of Europe. Critical geopolitics seeks “to disturb the innocence of geography and politicize the writing of global space” (Ó Tuathail, 1996: 20) by “deconstructing the ways in which ‘geopolitical knowledge’ is created around international crises, actors and events” (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 603; see Agnew, 1998; Parker, 1998; Taylor, 1999; Dodds & Atkinson, 2000). Ó Tuathail scrutinized the geopolitical rhetoric underlying recent American foreign policy debates and the role this rhetoric played in enabling or disabling certain outcomes (Ó Tuathail, 1986, 2002). Ó Tuathail and Luke (1994) highlighted how the end of the Cold War simultaneously instigated a ‘new world order’ and a ‘new word order’ in American foreign policy. A critical examination of the language used in geopolitical rhetoric offers a powerful interrogative tool for exploring the hidden assumptions helping to shape our imagined geographies and the practices and policies that result from them.

Rather than being objective designations, the formation of regional constructs within Europe has been intimately intertwined with shifting geopolitical perspectives tied to national identity. This simple act of naming then represents a common strategy deployed to shape the rhetoric and practice of international relations and is an essential step in redefining Europe’s imagined regional geography. As Neumann noted in
his summary of Russian views of the idea of Europe: “‘Europe’ is seen as a speech act; it is talked and written into existence” (Neumann, 1996: 2). Despite their imaginative aspects, we should not dismiss these geographies as mere fancy. The use of the term ‘imagined’ is not to suggest that they do not have very real consequences for international relations and peoples’ lives. On the contrary, the geopolitics of naming has played and continues to play a pivotal role in framing discussions of military strategies, national identity, political economy, and diplomacy in Europe and the world. Although it is too soon to make any sort of final pronouncements on this topic, this article offers a preliminary reading of the geopolitics of naming in a region still in the process of redefinition.

**East–West and the imagined geography of Europe**

Although some have traced the concept of an East–West division of Europe back to ancient Greece, the modern ideas of Europe and the West are largely products of the Enlightenment view of the West as synonymous with civilization (Jahn, 1990; Wilson & van der Dussen, 1995; Gress, 1998; Heffernan, 1998; Pinder, 1998; Heffernan, 2000; Mayhew, 2000). Wolff (1994) convincingly demonstrated how western travelers to Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century invented the idea of the East as a backward, semi-civilized realm loosely affiliated with the West. Western elites used this division to create a concrete spatial manifestation of the political, economic, and cultural differences they perceived between East and West. This invention of the East can be seen as a strategy employed by Westerns to turn “time into space” (Agnew, 1998: 32–48). Traveling from West to East was like traveling back in time. Within this framework, the West became advanced and modern, while the East remained primitive and pre-modern. By the end of the Enlightenment, the idea of the West had come to represent progress, liberty, civilization, and Europe itself, while the East was identified with backwardness, despotism, barbarity, Asia, and the Orient.

Although these concepts were rarely defined concretely, the East served as a foil for defining the West and portrayed a degree of cultural, in addition to spatial, separation between the two. At times the East has even been labeled the ‘other Europe’ (Walters, 1988; Rupnik, 1989; Lukacs, 1991). This East–West dichotomy has proven remarkably malleable in the face of shifting political and cultural contexts. The rise of racial discourse and nationalism during the nineteenth century adopted this framework to identify the East as a Slavic realm. During the Inter-War period, the West receded to encompass only France and Britain as the last bastions of democracy in an otherwise fascist Europe. British Prime Minister Chamberlain’s declaration of Czechoslovakia as a “faraway country” of which very little was known reflected the West’s view of many of the states to its east; located in the geographical center of the continent, but perceived as occupying its imagined margins. In this imagined geography, India was undoubtedly closer to Britain than the Sudetenland. After the Second World War, this East–West division was remolded to reflect Cold War geography and represented an unusual time when there was little ambiguity in defin-
ing East and West. Historian Derek Sayer’s claim that Czechs are seen as “at best tangential to the central narratives of ‘Europe,’ ‘the West,’ and ‘modernity,’” and when of necessity they do flit in and out of the picture, it is seldom as themselves,” could easily be extended to other countries outside the West (1998: 11).

Despite the end of the Cold War, this bipartite perception of Europe has remained embedded in geographical imaginations across the continent. The saliency of a slogan such as ‘return to Europe’ points to its continued power among government officials, academics, and the public. Within the EU, or simply Europe as it is increasingly identified, the East is often viewed as a source of crime, unwanted immigration, political instability, and violent nationalism. The states of the former Warsaw Pact have also readily utilized this East–West mode of thinking as they vied for EU and NATO membership, or to advance their own ‘return to Europe.’ It should not be surprising that these concepts have outlived the Cold War since their origins date back at least to the Enlightenment. While the cartographer’s pen may redraw political boundaries with relative ease, the imagined map of Europe and the names East and West have accrued significant meanings over time and proven difficult to discard.

Indeed, one reason this East–West distinction has retained such power is that it is intertwined with conceptions of national identity. Specifically, these geographies can help define a nation’s place in relation to other nations. An imagined geography often plays a central role in defining an imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Neumann, 1993; Dijkink, 1996; Herb, 1997; Herb & Kaplan, 1999; Bugge, 1999a; Neumann, 1999). Just as knowing your ‘place’ means knowing your role in specific social situations, the place of the nation is important in shaping its role among other nations. Indeed, East, Orient, Balkans, Asia, and even Russia have all served as spatial representations of the other in Western thought (Said, 1978; Jahn, 1990; Neumann, 1993; Wolff, 1994; Neumann, 1996; Todorova, 1997; Garton Ash, 1999; Neumann, 1999).

Although this framework of East and West developed initially as a product of Western imaginations, it has been adopted, with significant modifications, by cultural and political leaders across the continent. Although each author has imbued these concepts with his or her own perspectives and prejudices, some generalizations can be made. Nationalism and religion are two factors that have played important roles in shaping conceptions of East and West in the post-communist states. Czechs, especially since 1993, have uncompromisingly viewed themselves as belonging to a Western cultural realm (Rupnik, 1995; Holy, 1996; Bugge, 1999a; Bugge, 1999b; Bugge, 2000). This was often strengthened by labeling Slovakia as an Eastern other (Holy, 1996; Hilde, 1999). In Slovakia, strong nationalist sentiments generated a more eastern orientation among political leaders, although signs suggest this has weakened since Vladimír Mečiar was voted out of office. While strongly Western in political and economic outlook, Hungarians have regarded East and West as two possible national orientations.

“East” and “West” express two alternatives of national identity (and alternative concepts of the future) of many peoples who live on the periphery or see themselves as underdeveloped, in the current world system. “West” means catching
up with modernization in Western Europe, while “East” means preserving tradition and protecting what is felt to be ancestral national identity. (Hofer, 1994: 7)

In addition to bringing economic and social development, the West represents foreign influences that could weaken Hungarian national culture. The East, rather than being purely negative, represents the positive aspects of tradition and national identity. Poles have also generally viewed Western institutions favorably, but conservative religious and nationalist groups have been wary of the threat posed by secularization and homogenization (DiBiasio, 1995; Byrnes, 1997; Aniol, Byrnes, & Iankova, 1997; Mach, 1997; Wiskie, 1999). Russians have long vacillated between considering themselves as a part of Europe or distinct from it (Jahn, 1990; Bassin, 1991; Neumann, 1996). Only by understanding the evolution of the ideas of East and West and the different perspectives from which they are viewed can one make sense of the revival of the idea of Central Europe in the 1980s and the use of slogans like ‘return to Europe’ in the 1990s.

Reviving the center

An important consideration in the imagined geography of Europe is the idea of Central Europe as a region. The concept of a Central Europe, or Mitteleuropa as Germans have traditionally referred to the region, has historically been a troublesome concept for geographers, other scholars, and the general public (Sinnhuber, 1954). Merriam-Webster’s Geographical Dictionary defines both Central Europe and Mitteleuropa as an “indefinite and occasional term applied to the countries of the central part of Europe” (1997: 227, 752). The Dictionary of Geopolitics (O’Loughlin, 1994) includes entries for the German Mitteleuropa and the French l’Europe centrale, but Central Europe merely refers readers to the German and French definitions. While Mitteleuropa (literally Middle Europe) is usually translated as Central Europe, something is lost in the translation. These terms, like East and West, are more than geographical names. They indicate a variety of subtleties depending on who is using them and in what context.

Originally popularized by Friedrich Naumann (1917) during the First World War, Mitteleuropa has represented a variety of regional concepts over the course of the twentieth century (Sinnhuber, 1954; Meyer, 1955; Droz, 1960; Schultz, 1989; Eissfeld, 1993; Willenz, 1993; Stirk, 1994; Katzenstein, 1997; Bugge, 1999a). Mitteleuropa can simply be translated as Central Europe, but the term has long had rather sinister connotations for many Europeans. This is because during the first half of the twentieth century, Germans used Mitteleuropa to reinforce their proprietorship of Central Europe. While the German variations of Central Europe, Mitteleuropa, have all entailed some form of multinational structure with Germans and Austrians serving as the nucleus, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian versions of Central Europe tended to view small size and vulnerability as prerequisites for inclusion and are characterized by the exclusion of Germany. The use of Mitteleuropa as a German imperial project stigmatized the word to such a degree that it now carries definite
negative implications, especially for Germany’s eastern neighbors and France. Mitteleuropa has historically implied German hegemony, while Central Europe can be viewed as a counter-hegemonic strategy employed to oppose this domination. In this article, Central Europe refers to ideas envisioning a region in the center of Europe, however that may be defined spatially, that generally exclude Germany. Conversely, Mitteleuropa represents regional constructions for that area that normally include Germany.

The terms Mitteleuropa and Central Europe came to play largely peripheral roles in scholarly discourse and the popular imagination immediately after 1945. They seemed to represent a bygone era. The end of the Second World War ushered in a new era with the United States and the Soviet Union opposing each other. The Cold War forced a very clear dichotomy on European geography. This bipolar world simply did not allow any room, conceptually or physically, for a middle or central space in Europe.

While the geopolitical realities of the Cold War seemed to preclude any notions of a central space, a few individuals still worked toward this goal. Polish historian Oscar Halecki was acutely aware of the East–West division of Europe. He felt this East–West vocabulary reduced European history to a story of the major Western powers and portrayed the East as occupying a subservient role. As Halecki noted:

One of the main defects of that whole terminology, and of the basic distinction between Western and Eastern Europe, lies in the impression obviously created that all of what is geographically “Eastern” is alien, or even opposed, to “Western” – that is, truly European – civilization. (Halecki, 1950: 138)

Rather than rejecting the entire framework, Halecki proposed adding West–Central and East–Central Europe as intermediary zones; West–Central Europe was basically German in character, while East–Central Europe included those lands between Germany, Russia, Turkey, and Sweden. Yet, it is important to note that East–Central Europe, as conceived by Halecki, was decidedly Western in its cultural and historical orientation:

… it appears that some countries which are situated in the eastern, or at least the east–central, part of Europe have particularly close ties, cultural and even political, with the Latin West of the continent (Halecki, 1950: 138). In connection with Western Europe they developed their individual national cultures and contributed to the general progress of European civilization. (Halecki, 1952: 3)

It was clear that East–Central Europe represented a vital component of Western civilization. While concentrating on the region’s history, Halecki still critiqued the geography of the Cold War: “No permanent peace will be established before their [referring to East–Central Europeans] traditional place in the European community, now enlarged as the Atlantic community, is restored” (Halecki, 1952: 4). While his argument could not realistically challenge contemporary geopolitical realities,
Halecki’s renaming of the region set an important precedent for the later revival of the idea of Central Europe.

The idea of *Mitteleuropa* also resurfaced, rather surprisingly, in West Germany. Among conservatives, the idea represented a vaguely disguised revisionist project aimed at unifying Germany and recovering territories lost after 1945 (Schultz, 1989: 334–335; Betz, 1990: 178–180). Members of the liberal Social Democratic Party also began discussing *Mitteleuropa* in the 1950s. These discussions clearly influenced the design of Chancellor Willy Brandt’s so-called Ostpolitik. Concerned by the confrontational nature of the East–West alliance system, Brandt and other German liberals hoped to establish a new European security arrangement that would allow work on German reunification, the ultimate objective, to proceed. Through this ‘Eastern Policy,’ Brandt strengthened relations with members of the Warsaw Pact and promoted arms reductions across the continent (Garton Ash, 1990, 1993; Willenz, 1993). Despite these occasional references, the dominant discourse of East and West overshadowed the idea of *Mitteleuropa* after 1945.

During the 1980s, however, mounting enthusiasm for defining a central European space emerged mainly through the writings of Czech, Hungarian, and Polish dissidents who sought to define a central European identity and culture as a means to overcome the region’s political divisions (Fehér, 1989). The establishment of the journal *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture* in 1982 provided a regular venue for promoting the existence of a central European space and culture distinct from the East. Central Europe came to represent a conceptual shift toward the West. Although this seemed to suggest an end to Soviet hegemony, the exact boundaries of this new Central Europe were difficult to determine. Indeed, most of these writers had little interest in giving their ideas anything other than a vague territorial definition. Rather, they wished to revive the region as a cultural or moral realm independent of state involvement and geopolitical considerations. Yet authors were generally quite specific in describing what Central Europe was not, namely a part of Eastern Europe (Szporluk, 1982; Konrád, 1985; Bojár, 1988).

Milan Kundera, a Czech dissident writer, reintroduced many people to the idea of Central Europe as a viable regional identity. Kundera clearly realized the geopolitical significance of naming when he attacked the “perfidious vocabulary that has transformed Central Europe into the East” (Finkielkraut, 1982: 29). For Kundera (1984), the cultural legacy of the Habsburg Empire formed a common heritage around which Central Europe could be framed. While German culture might have provided a unifying element, Kundera did not include Germany (East or West) in his version of Central Europe. He also excluded the Soviet Union from Europe claiming it was not just another “European power but … an other civilization” (Kundera, 1984: 34, italics in original). Undoubtedly, Kundera was arguing over more than mere semantics when asserting that Central Europe was “the eastern border of the West” (Kundera, 1984: 33). Kundera clearly intended his new region to exclude as well as include and left Europe in the awkward situation of having a West and Center, but no East.

The exclusion of Germany from Central Europe may be interpreted as an attack on Germany’s troubled history in the region, but this was not the focus of Kundera’s
criticism. Renaming the region as Central Europe served as a direct challenge to the Soviet, or Eastern, system of cultural and political suppression. This was evident in Kundera’s description of Central Europe as “the part of Europe situated geographically in the center — culturally in the West and politically in the East” (Kundera, 1984: 33). Kundera went on to state that Central Europe was “politically in the East” because it had been “kidnapped, displaced, and brainwashed” (Kundera, 1984: 33). Besides initiating a debate about Central Europe as a tool against Soviet imperialism, Kundera also proposed an intellectual or even moral, rather than geographical, foundation for Central Europe: “Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture and a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation” (Kundera, 1984: 35). Several other prominent writers such as Czeslaw Milosz (1982, 1989) and Jacques Rupnik (1987) raised similar ideas of Central Europe. In these discussions, East, West, and Center represented powerful rhetorical devices at the core of overlapping efforts to question and ultimately redraw the Cold War map of Europe.

Hungarian writer György Konrád echoed the idea of a common Central European heritage and history based on the Habsburg Empire as put forth by Kundera. In his book Antipolitics Konrád argued for the establishment of a neutral, pacifist Mitteleuropa free from superpower conflict and the threat of nuclear war. In his view, antipolitics and Mitteleuropa were a refusal to participate in the Cold War, an attack on state intrusion in private life, and a means to overcome the division of Europe by clearing a central European space of certain geopolitical relationships (Konrád, 1984). While Konrád and Kundera both advocated some form of Central European federation that excluded the superpowers, several differences existed. Unlike Kundera, Konrád’s ideas were directed against the United States as well as the Soviet Union, but the most significant difference was the role of Germany. Konrád saw a peaceful, reunified Germany in the center of Europe as the only realistic means to overcome the Cold War division. Konrád’s view of Germany may account for his willingness to use Mitteleuropa and Central Europe as nearly synonymous.

Conservative author Karl Schlögel was one of the first Germans to revive the idea of a cultural Mitteleuropa that included Germany and Austria. Worried by the political overtones of the debate, Schlögel tried to take a purely cultural approach and hoped to restore Mitteleuropa as a web of human contact and interaction. Looking back at the ease of earlier communication and travel in the region, Schlögel concluded:

This density and fast pace of life are explained, not by the short distance between Vienna and Berlin, Munich and Dresden, Prague and Copenhagen, Budapest and Amsterdam, Trieste and Warsaw measured according to modern standards, but by the homogeneity of the cultural space alone, which however, has always been endangered by various nationalities. (Schlögel, 1986: 16–17)

These earlier times were a marked contrast to the rigid borders of the Cold War. His book, suggestively titled Die Mitte liegt ostwärts: Die Deutschen, der verlorene Osten und Mitteleuropa (The Center Lies Eastwards: The Germans, the Lost East
and *Mitteleuropa*), was a rather nostalgic look at what Germans and German culture had accomplished in the region and how that legacy had been destroyed. As Schloßgel noted:

The territory of Central and Eastern Europe, varied like a checkerboard and interlaced as hardly any other, is partially a consequence of German settlements. These had only one parallel, the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. This was open country, but also dangerous territory. ... It required the destructive force of a thirty year war and a Blitzkrieg finale to tear apart a fabric that a whole continent had woven for centuries. In the destruction of the Central European Jews, who with the Germans served as the integrative strength of this region, the old *Mitteleuropa* perished. (Schloßgel, 1986: 79, 81)

Despite the destruction of the old *Mitteleuropa*, Schloßgel believed this common heritage offered an alternative to the East–West dichotomy dominating the continent. By following a foreign policy focused on the West, Schloßgel feared that West Germans would forget their cultural ties with the East. Only through the remembrance of this eastern heritage could Germans gain a complete perspective of their history and national identity. Schloßgel also criticized other writers, such as Kundera, for their poetic and imaginary writing style: “The lost middle in Berlin is no literary topic, but rather an actual place” (Schloßgel, 1986: 120). He also claimed that any central region that ignored German culture would not be possible since only it was capable of turning such diverse nationalities into a cohesive regional construct.

Schloßgel brought the idea of a cultural *Mitteleuropa* back to Germany, but the idea quickly moved into the political arena. Conservatives, such as sociologist Bernard Willms, began speaking about Germany’s historical mission in *Mitteleuropa*, a thinly veiled political reference supporting German reunification and hegemony in Central Europe (Betz, 1990: 179). *Mitteleuropa* also represented an important political program for many members of the Green and Social Democratic parties. This second Ostpolitik aimed to “win back Mitteleuropa first as a concept, then as a reality” (Glotz, 1986: 585). Otto Schily, currently serving as Germany’s Interior Minister, proposed a neutral Central European Peace Union as a way out of the Cold War (Betz, 1990: 177). Several other Social Democrats, such Peter Glotz and Peter Bender, also raised the idea of a demilitarized *Mitteleuropa* as a buffer between the superpowers (Löser & Schilling, 1984; Schweisfurth, 1985; Jaworski, 1988; Garton Ash, 1990). “The renaissance of *Mitteleuropa*,” according to Bender, “is first of all a protest against the division of the continent, against the hegemony of Americans and Russians, against totalitarianism of the ideologies” (Bender, 1987: 297). Germans at both ends of the political spectrum sought to revive *Mitteleuropa* as a viable foreign policy objective. Although significant differences existed between the *Mitteleuropa* of the right and left, both regarded the creation of this space as a step toward reunification and diminishing superpower influence (Nagorski, 1987; Schultz, 1989; Betz, 1990; Garton Ash, 1993; Bassin, 1996).

From rather modest beginnings, the debate took on a truly international character, and, as it did so, the distinction between Central Europe and *Mitteleuropa* blurred.
Indeed, a myriad of Central Europes and Mitteleuropas emerged. The collection of essays published under the title *In Search of Central Europe* demonstrates the varying perceptions and also summarizes many of the key characteristics of this newly imagined Central Europe. While referring to the idea of Central Europe in decidedly positive terms, the contributors to the volume tended to exclude Russia from the sphere of European cultural development (Schöpflin, 1989), be critical of Western leaders and intellectuals for narrowly defining Europe as the EU and NATO (Seton-Watson, 1989), and argue that the East cannot be construed as any type of real historical, cultural, or even political unit (Kusý, 1989). It should not be surprising that the territorial basis for this region-building project remained extremely vague. As noted above, most of the authors who posited the idea of a Central Europe envisioned it as an imagined realm of cultural and historical affinity independent of political borders. Miłosz recognized the imaginative quality of this central space: “Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion. It is not easy to trace its boundaries on the map … The ways of feeling and thinking of its inhabitants must thus suffice for drawing mental lines which seem to be more durable than the borders of the states” (Miłosz, 1989: 116–117).

The idea of Mitteleuropa was given a similar treatment in *Traumland Mitteleuropa* (Dreamland Mitteleuropa, Papcke, & Weidenfeld, 1988). Erhard Busek, Deputy Mayor of Vienna and later Austrian Vice-Chancellor, had long supported the idea of Mitteleuropa as a regional solution to the maze of European borders. “Mitteleuropa had and has constantly moving borders because it is not an instrument of power politics, but rather more of an intellectual-cultural principal. It will not and should not have to do with state borders, because it should indeed be about border crossing” (Busek, 1988: 19). Most other contributors were also cautiously optimistic about Mitteleuropa’s prospects (Mlynář, 1988; Weidenfeld, 1988; Papcke, 1988). Karsten Voight, then a member of the German parliament, took a very different stance by stating “Mitteleuropa was a concept with unclear political substance” and “a specific Central European cultural identity does not exist” (Voight, 1988: 96–97). Presenting a French view, Joseph Rovan warned of dire consequences entailed by regional cooperation under German auspices. Rovan described Mitteleuropa as an “exceedingly dangerous idea” that represented “a weapon against Europe” (Rovan, 1988: 12, 14). Although some were clearly troubled by the Mitteleuropa debate in Germany, the idea was no longer taboo and became increasingly visible in debates about foreign policy and intra-German relations during the late 1980s.

The debate over defining a central space in Europe even left the confines of scholarly journals and emerged in newspapers and weekly news magazines. Some of these titles seemed to reflect the terminological confusion surrounding the debate (“East is East and West is West, and What is in the Middle?” 1987; “Eastern or Central Europe?” Bojtár, 1988; “What is Europe, Where is Europe?” Seton-Watson, 1989), while others suggested the region was suffering from an identity crisis (“Can Mitteleuropa Find Itself?” 1989).

In 1973, Cohen stated emphatically that “Central Europe is no more” (Cohen, 1973: 222), but sixteen years later, Garton Ash would proclaim, “Central Europe is back” (Garton Ash, 1989: 179). Given the explosion of literature on the topic during
the 1980s, it was difficult to disagree. Despite an emphasis on culture and history, the naming of a central European space was primarily a geopolitical tool. Central Europe and Mitteleuropa developed as broad spatial metaphors to challenge Soviet hegemony, critique the West’s apathy toward the ‘other Europe,’ and overcome the division of the continent. Although representing different political and national viewpoints, proponents of these ideas generally sought to create a third European space defined by culture and history capable of transcending the political boundaries of the Cold War. Although this became an important topic for some, “the dream of Central Europe [was] not a mass phenomenon” (Konrád, 1985: 109) and there was little chance for change during the Cold War.

Mitteleuropa fails

There can be little doubt that the late 1980s and early 1990s were the high water mark for the revival of the idea of a central space in the imagined geography of Europe. The idea helped initiate a reappraisal of the commonly accepted bipartite division of Europe. Germans on both sides of the political spectrum utilized the idea of Mitteleuropa to challenge Soviet and American influence in Europe in general and the continued division of Germany in particular. The revolutions of 1989 altered the international scene to such an extent that it appeared that these once imagined central spaces could be more concretely defined and possibly transformed into corresponding political and economic structures. Yet, despite the rhetoric leading up to 1990, attempts to institutionalize Mitteleuropa floundered as the idea failed to capture the imagination of the public and quickly lost much of its luster among political and cultural elites. As outlined above, Mitteleuropa, the idea of a Central Europe that included Germany and Austria, re-emerged in the late 1980s. Some Germans, such as Schloßgel and Glotz, and even a few non-Germans, such as Konrád, had supported the idea as a means to challenge the division of Europe. While some scholars, such as Konrád and Schloßgel for example, had previously used Central Europe and Mitteleuropa interchangeably, their meanings now increasingly diverged. As momentum toward German reunification accelerated, writers began to make clearer distinctions between Mitteleuropa and Central Europe. Some writers, recalling its past associations with German expansionism, actively opposed any ideas of Mitteleuropa, especially those expressed in conservative circles (Schultz, 1989; Betz, 1990; Rupnik, 1990; Bugge, 1999a). Several events within Germany, such as demands by Germans expelled from the Sudetenland and Western Poland for compensation and the German government’s hesitation before finally accepting the finality of the Oder-Neisse border with Poland, only added to this concern. While most critics of Mitteleuropa agreed a resurgence of German military imperialism appeared remote, they feared Germany’s new strength could easily result in economic dependency or even cultural imperialism.

The most dramatic protests came from German Social Democrats and other liberals who described Germany as the Fourth Reich, establishing a link with the Nazi Third Reich (Schwarz, 1994; Schmidt, 1993). One of the first to raise this frightening
prospect was, quite surprisingly, Peter Glotz, who had earlier promoted his own version of *Mitteleuropa*. In late 1989, perhaps fearful of the course the conservative Kohl administration would chart after reunification, Glotz sarcastically asked, “Please, at least in this century no more plans for a ‘Fourth Reich’” (Schwarz, 1994: 226); while Social Democrat Chancellor candidate Oskar Lafontaine warned: “The specter of a Fourth German Reich alarms our western no less than our eastern neighbors” (Lafontaine, 1989: 21). In his book Das Vierte Reich: Deutschlands später Sieg (The Fourth Reich: Germany’s Delayed Victory, 1990), left-wing activist Heleno Sana downplayed the possibility of military expansion, but worried Germany’s economic strength would allow it to dominant the East. Another writer characterized this “natural” and “inevitable” future Reich as a “return to German hegemony in this part of the world”; “Mitteleuropa is coming back, and its capital will be Berlin” (Mead, 1990: 603).

While most other writers were less dramatic, they also expressed concern over Germany’s new position. The Hungarian philosopher Mihály Vajda believed the idea of *Mitteleuropa* represented a viable undertaking:

> Mitteleuropa is thus more than only history and nostalgia. It is a project, a sketch, which appears to involve the interests of all Central European countries. Is it therefore only dangerous, because the old Germany wished to seize a guiding role in Mitteleuropa? If a democratic Germany finds in it its new function, the project of Mitteleuropa appears to help channel German energy in a positive direction, instead of allowing it to pile up like fuel. (Vajda, 1989: 56–7)

Vajda was rather optimistic about the future role of Germany, but he still seemed to believe that German energy was inherently combustible. *Mitteleuropa* could help direct Germany in a productive direction, but Vajda also warned of the opposite effect. Germany’s eastern neighbors certainly welcomed economic investment and political guidance, but too much posed a possible threat. Although *Mitteleuropa* may have been a viable regional concept, it appeared to involve some degree of danger.

Economic imperialism seemed to represent the major threat posed by the new Germany (Deák, 1990; Xiang, 1992; Eisfeld, 1993; Gray, 1994). Viewing the transition underway in Europe after the end of the Cold War, Nijman and van der Wusten wrote that the “relative dominance of the new German state in the East, unhindered by the United States, will be even more impressive” (Nijman & van der Wusten, 1993: 28). Political scientist James Kurth was even more alarmed that these new economic opportunities to the east would profoundly redirect Germany’s economic and foreign policy. “There is consequently a German economic drive to the east, an imperative to create a *wirtschaftsraum*, or German economic realm, in those regions” (Kurth, 1995: 384). Kurth warned: “Germany is not about to make Western Europe into a German Europe. It is, however, making Central Europe into a German Europe, and its efforts to do so will divide Western Europe and Central Europe. They will also divide the new Eastern Europe (the European territories of the former Soviet Union) and Central Europe as well” (Kurth, 1995: 383). For Kurth, the resurgence
of *Mitteleuropa* as a German sphere of influence brought with it the prospect of regional instability and the redivision of Europe.

In addition to highlighting the negative connotations of *Mitteleuropa*, writers soon began to make a definite distinction between it and Central Europe. Several writers questioned whether German influence would simply replace the receding Soviet Empire and attached those fears to the recently revived idea of *Mitteleuropa*. French political scientist Jacques Rupnik published an article in a special issue of *Daedalus* questioning whether the end of Soviet domination meant a return of Central Europe or *Mitteleuropa*. For Rupnik, the distinction was a critical one:

> The end of the Yalta system implies the systematic decay of the two alliances and the overcoming of the partition of Europe and Germany. But it leaves open the question of what is to come in its stead: a new Central Europe as a community of nations between Germany and Russia or a new version of *Mitteleuropa* as a German sphere of influence. (Rupnik, 1990: 275)

If *Mitteleuropa*, like the idea of Central Europe, had represented a neutral, pacifist concept during much of the 1980s, its emphasis quickly shifted toward its earlier associations with German imperialism. Much of Rupnik’s unease rested upon two major themes of German involvement in Central Europe: “a long history of interaction and the tendency to seek hegemony” (Rupnik, 1990: 255). History provided many examples of these themes and Kurth saw the new *Mitteleuropa* as their latest manifestation.

Konrád expressed a similar view a few years later. Previously Konrád (1984) had not distinguished between Central Europe and *Mitteleuropa*, but he modified his views after 1989. Central Europe was now “made up of small nations between two large ones: Germany and Russia” (Konrád, 1995: 157). The exclusion of Germany marked a significant change in Konrád’s thinking. Germany was to play an important role in overcoming the division of Europe, but Konrád now argued for integration in Central Europe without German involvement and did not mention *Mitteleuropa*. This shift in terminology helped erase the brief popularity that *Mitteleuropa* had enjoyed.

Jorg Brechtfeld, a German political scientist, tried to revitalize the idea of *Mitteleuropa* by demonstrating the historical importance of the idea in German foreign policy. Brechtfeld claimed: “Following the division of Europe, *Mitteleuropa* was largely incorporated into the German question. Therefore, a solution to the German question implied an end to the partition and division in the centre of Europe and, almost necessarily, a re-establishment of *Mitteleuropa*” (Brechtfeld, 1996: 58). If *Mitteleuropa* is meant as anything beyond a reunified Germany, it is difficult to justify this position. Few Germans publicly expressed interest in *Mitteleuropa* once reunification seemed inevitable. In its post-reunification situation, Brechtfeld concluded: “Germany’s success depends on the political elites’ ability to reorient foreign policy towards *Mitteleuropa* as a political reality rather than a vague vision” (Brechtfeld, 1996: 97), yet German Social Democrats reversed their earlier views on *Mitteleuropa* and Kohl remained committed to strengthening the EU. As Brechtfeld
himself admitted: “Mitteleuropa as a concept of regional organization, with strong German involvement, seems as futuristic as ever” (Brechtfeld, 1996: 93). Although Brechtfeld’s Mitteleuropa was clearly different from earlier imperialistic versions, it still failed to generate much enthusiasm.

Despite Mitteleuropa’s popularity before reunification, many Germans have since come to regard the East as a source of instability, crime, unwanted immigration, and cheap labor. While a few in Germany continued to support Mitteleuropa, the general tone has become decidedly indifferent toward the idea. In spite of sometimes overheated warnings of German hegemonic aspirations in Central Europe, there is little evidence to suggest that this has ever been a serious goal and most believe democratic traditions to be firmly entrenched in Germany (Betz, 1990; Coker, 1990; Dienstbier, 1990; Havel, 1990c; Eisele, 1993; Willenz, 1993; Schwarz, 1994). Although some right-wing nationalist fringe groups continue to demonstrate interest in Mitteleuropa, mainstream liberals and conservatives have disowned the idea. Lacking significant support within Germany and actively opposed by many of its neighbors, the idea of a German Mitteleuropa appears once again relegated to the margins.

One final aspect of the revival of Mitteleuropa was an Austrian version framed around waxing sentimentality for the old Habsburg Empire (Delanty, 1996). One can certainly find an element of this nostalgia with Kundera and other writers, especially Austrians, who promoted the idea before 1990 (Ionesco, 1985; Busek & Brix, 1986; Busek, 1988; Brix, 1990; Busek, 1997). Otto von Habsburg (1991), descendant from the imperial Habsburg family, proposed a ‘return to the center’ as an alternative to the ‘return to Europe.’ Von Habsburg and other writers recalled an idealized social and cultural milieu that existed before nationalism and the Cold War tore the region apart and hoped that some of these elements, such as toleration, could form the spiritual basis for a new Mitteleuropa centered on Austria. Yet, most argued that the countries of the region were best served by continuing toward membership in Western institutions, especially the EU and NATO (Maier, 1993). Nostalgia for a new Austrian Mitteleuropa, like its German counterpart, waned swiftly after 1990 and virtually disappeared with Austria’s accession to the EU. Indeed, von Habsburg (1999) himself would later focus on pan-European integration rather than regional cooperation within Central Europe.

Central Europe falters

The idea of Central Europe followed a path slightly different than that of Mitteleuropa. Although efforts to institutionalize regional cooperation, especially among Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, appeared promising, most of these efforts were languishing by 1995. In most respects, efforts to construct a central European space were gradually overtaken by more pressing efforts to join the expanding EU. Significant tensions soon developed between efforts to build separate political structures for Central Europe and the alternative project of the ‘return to Europe,’ a project encompassing not only an adherence to Western-style government and economics
and membership in Western institutions, but also a perceived return to ‘European’ values, history, and culture. Although this geopolitical transition touched all European countries, each deploying slightly different strategies, this section focuses on the four Visegrád nations. Among the post-communist states, this group was initially seen as the closest politically, culturally, and economically, as well as geographically, to EU member states. While studies elucidating the strategies implemented by other countries, like the Baltic states, are needed, space necessitates a narrower focus here.

The Visegrád Group, comprising Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic and Slovakia after 1993), Poland, and Hungary, was the most ambitious attempt to give the imagined Central Europe of the 1980s a definite framework for political and economic cooperation. Yet after some significant initial achievements, such as working to end the Warsaw Pact and the establishment of the Central European Free Trade Agreement, the Group was largely defunct by the mid-1990s (Tőkés, 1991; Inotai, 1991; Kolankiewicz, 1994; Bunce, 1997; Rhodes, 1998; Rhodes, 1999; Fawn, 2002). A closer examination of the Visegrád Group highlights several important connections between efforts to promote regional cooperation and earlier attempts to define a Central European regional identity. As Rhodes noted: “The ‘Central European’ identity of former dissidents turned policymakers provided the initial impetus for cooperation” in the region (Rhodes, 1998: 165).

Czechoslovak President Václav Havel inaugurated serious inter-governmental discussion about cooperation between his country, Poland, and Hungary in his January 1990 address before the Polish parliament:

We have a chance to transform Central Europe from a phenomenon that has so far been historical and spiritual into a political phenomenon. We have the chance to take a string of European countries … and transform them into a definite special body, which could approach Western Europe not as a poor dissident or a helpless, searching, amnestied prisoner, but as someone who has something to offer. (Havel, 1990a: 56)

Havel’s speech was well received. Given the extremely fluid international situation, the Visegrád states shared several foreign policy goals, including disbanding the Warsaw Pact and Comecon, negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet troops, restructuring economic relationships, and cooperating in soliciting aid from the West. By 1993, the Visegrád Group had made remarkable progress in achieving these goals. Yet, within the next two years, much of this region-building momentum had died. Several reasons contributed to the difficulties of the earlier cultural idea of Central Europe to translate into the realm of politics, such as the break-up of Czechoslovakia, the undemocratic Mečiar regime in Slovakia, the stabilization of relations with Russia, and a lack of consistent support from the West, but arguably the most significant factor involved diverging views among these countries over how best to ‘return to Europe.’

The ‘return to Europe’ had always been the implicit, long-term goal of the Visegrád Group. Returning to Havel’s speech before the Polish parliament: “A true coordination of our policies during that process that we both call “The Return to Eur-
ope”, ought to grow out of a really authentic friendship … we also ought to coordinate our efforts as much as possible …” (Havel, 1990a: 56). Havel repeated this assertion at a later summit of the Visegrád states: “We are giving the working title “Return to Europe” to the task that today stands before the Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks” (Havel, 1990b: 59). Cooperation, argued Havel a year later, was their “best chance of shortening the road and catching up with western Europe” (“The Visegrád Summit” 1991: 28). At the same time, Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier spoke of ‘rejoining Europe,’ i.e. full membership in the EU, NATO, and other western institutions, as the key factor in promoting security in Central Europe. He warned the West against building a “new wall” and flatly rejected separate security structures for the region (1991: 126–127).

Similar views can be found among Poland’s political elite (Aniol et al., 1997; Mach, 1997; Terry, 2000). Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the country’s first democratically elected Prime Minister, had already spoken of ‘returning to Europe’ in 1989 (Mach, 1997: 42). A few years later, Poland’s influential Foreign Minister, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, noted the importance of regional cooperation among Central Europeans, but mostly as “proof of their viability and credibility as new partners of the West” (Skubiszewski, 1991: 62). Succinctly laying out Poland’s main foreign policy objective, “our aim is European cooperation and European unity” (Skubiszewski, 1990: 148), and once achieved, “the hard core of Europe will compose a bigger territory” (Neumann, 1999: 157). In a 1991 interview, Bronisław Geremek, Foreign Minister since 1997, strongly advocated Poland’s entry into Western institutions, but made no reference to Central Europe and indeed, much of his earlier academic career focused on Poland’s historical role within Western Europe (Micgiel, 1991; Geremek, 1996). The economic and political reforms of the 1990s, Geremek argued, “allowed many nations in our region to claim that we belong to a single European family” (Geremek, 1999: 116). Implicit in this discourse is the view that other Eastern or Balkan countries did not ‘belong’ and would not be part of Europe’s new ‘hard core.’ Although politicians from the region continually spoke of Europe, one gets the impression that they were actually referring specifically to the West and its institutions. Clearly, Polish foreign policy was also ultimately focused on integration with the West and not building separate and permanent regional institutions.

Many prominent Hungarians were also skeptical. László Kiss, an international relations expert, criticized the idea of a Central European organization composed of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland as “not realistic” (Kiss, 1991: 103). Kiss saw such plans as merely “a means for integration into Europe as defined by the EC” (Kiss, 1991: 102). György Enyedi also dismissed the nostalgic tone of the debate about Central Europe. Enyedi argued that the idea suggested inferiority compared to the West, but countered that the region’s diversity made it “more European than some great Western cultures” (1990: 143). Although critical of the excessive commercialism of western societies, György Dalos (1990) still argued for closer relations with the West to help preserve European cultural and moral values. Despite some initial enthusiasm, many within the region began to question the project’s relevance, viewing Central Europe as a transitional step toward inclusion within the West and Europe.
Indeed, the Visegrád Group’s own official statements attest to its provisional nature. The Group’s official website notes that all members “aspire to become members of the European Union” and that the Group “was not created as an alternative to all-European integration efforts…” As the Group’s 2001 annual report affirms: “Political objectives of the co-operation focused over the past year on promotion of the Visegrád countries’ readiness for and contribution to European and Euroatlantic integration. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia worked together and assisted each other in preparations for European Union membership” (Visegrad Homepage, 2001).

Although the idea of the center and the return initially appeared complementary, leaders in the region began to perceive contradictions between the two. Czech political leaders, in particular, feared that Central European integration detracted from the ultimate goal of integration with Western Europe and that Visegrád could be used by the West to delay Czech admission into the EU and NATO. A spirit of competition emerged after western institutions made it clear that not all countries that applied for membership would gain full access. Prime Minister Václav Klaus, for example, dismissed Visegrád as an artificial creation of the West designed to serve as a poor man’s club for the post-communist states (Klaus, 1993), while the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry, Miroslav Somol (1994), stated: “We refuse to make some sort of gentlemen’s agreement that we will all go together into the European Union. … We think there are many differences between the countries [of Central Europe], economically and philosophically.” Even, Havel began to downplay the importance of Visegrád and the idea of Central Europe, although he shunned the competitive spirit felt by others. As Havel stated: “By virtue of their [the countries of Central Europe] entire history, spiritual and intellectual traditions, culture, atmosphere and geopolitical position, the latter countries belong to the classical European West, and any separation of them from that West would be suicidal for the whole of Europe” (Havel, 1994: 6).

It appears that the framework of East–West continued to provide the context within which Havel and most other European political leaders still operated. Rather than continuing to assert their credentials as Central Europeans, many policy-makers and writers from the region increasingly emphasized their shared historical and intellectual roots in the West. Zeigler’s analysis of cartographic images produced during the 1990s by former communist states demonstrated a desire among those countries to visually distance themselves from their ‘Eastern’ past. Although produced by different countries, the maps, even those from Belarus, tended to end at the 40th meridian, thereby literally cutting Russia largely out of the picture (Zeigler, 2002). Once again, the idea of belonging to the West implied that there are those who did not. Attempts to ‘return to Europe,’ or perhaps it is more accurate to speak of a ‘return to Western Europe,’ gradually eclipsed the idea of Central Europe and undermined prospects for continued regional cooperation independent of western organizations.

One can trace the origins of the ‘return to Europe’ back to the dissident authors of the 1980s. Although Kundera was perhaps most responsible for reviving the idea of Central Europe, his description of Central Europe as an unfortunate part of Western Europe leads one to question if Central Europe was a distinct entity or best
understood as a sub-region of the West. As Vajda stated: “There are crucial differences of human behavior between Central Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe proper,” conversely “Central Eastern Europeans are fundamentally Europeans…” (Vajda, 1985: 6, 29). Central Europe, then, had a very distinct eastern boundary, but a rather blurry western frontier. Rather than a step toward the destruction of the East–West division of Europe, perhaps it is more useful to view the revival of a new European center as a transitional stage in defining a new East–West divide, as an attempt, especially by those who were in the East, to make sure that they would be on the western side of any new divide.

While a few continued to promote the idea of Central Europe, references to it waned as attention turned instead to the political, economic, and cultural implications of the ‘return to Europe.’ One who tried to keep the idea from being completely forgotten was Konrád. Although Konrád had distanced himself from the idea of Mitteleuropa, he continued to promote the idea of Central Europe, i.e. a central region without Germany, as a space of toleration and a unique mixture of East and West. Yet Konrád realized that the idea had limited prospects. “Central Europe is an aristocratic metaphor,” Konrád observed. “I do not see throngs of voters gathering in its name, nor do I see much political or economic advantage to integration in the immediate future” (Konrád, 1995: 160). Early in the debate, Konrád, foreshadowing the later metaphor of the ‘return to Europe,’ contended, “the road to Europe and a wider world beyond leads by way of Central Europe” (Konrád, 1985: 112). By the mid-1990s many in the region believed to have already passed this ‘Central Europe’ stage on their journey to Europe.

Although the idea of Central Europe and any political program derived from it seem to have receded into the background, this does not necessarily mean that they have no future. Although the prospects for wide-ranging cooperation within the Central European Initiative appear remote since it expanded to a total of seventeen members, regional cooperation, albeit limited in scope, has continued among the Visegrád countries. Delayed entry into the EU and statements by EU officials declaring regional cooperation among potential members as a precondition for eventual membership may even led to a revival of other largely-defunct Visegrád institutions (Come back, Visegrád, 1999; Fawn, 2002). Outside of the political arena, two universities, the Central European University in Budapest and the Viadrina European University on the German–Polish border, and numerous other transnational academic and cultural institutions have emerged throughout the region. As Konrád reflected on the apparent failure of a political Central Europe: “Prospects further down the line are promising, but politicians tend to rush things” (Konrád, 1995: 160). This may indeed turn out to be the case, but for now, the popularity of the idea of a central space in Europe has not yet proven capable of overturning the dominant framework of East and West in the imagined geography of Europe. Ultimately, most acknowledge that cooperation in the region can best be achieved by joining the EU and completing the ‘return to Europe.’
The imagined geography of Europe revisited

What factors contributed to the sudden rise and subsequent decline of the idea of a central European region? While the answer certainly involves complex political, cultural, and economic processes, this article has highlighted the role the geographical imagination and the power of naming has played and continues to play in framing relations among European nations and reshaping the imagined geography of East and West. The creation of a central space as a direct challenge to this mode of thought appeared to be the main goal for many writers, but one can look to the origins of the debate to find its ultimate objective. Germans were primarily interested in German reunification, and once achieved, proponents of Mitteleuropa had little reason to continue. The view of Central Europe as a geographically disadvantaged part of Western Europe offers the key to understanding the decline of this imagined center. Indeed, the idea of a central space was challenged and eventually eclipsed by a more powerful project, the ‘return to Europe.’ Here one finds the underlying motives for creating this central space: membership in the EU and participation in Western society. These central spaces were conceived as intermediate stages in an effort to deconstruct the East and ‘return to Europe.’ Labeling your nation as Central European served to prove its ‘Western’ credentials and simultaneously differentiate it from those who are truly Eastern or Balkan (Ágh, 1998; Neumann, 1993; Bugge, 1999b; Garton Ash, 1999; Neumann, 1999; Connor, 2000; Zeigler, 2002). The debate about the existence of Central Europe and a Central European culture revolved around, Dingsdale recently argued, “the question of the distinction between Central and Eastern Europe” (Dingsdale, 2002: 16).

Although this author and many others remain skeptical about the future viability of any separate Central European organization or identity (Lewis, 1994; Judt, 1996; Rey, 1996; Szajkowski & Borragán, 2000), others are more optimistic (Carter, 1996; Ágh, 1998; Dingsdale, 1999; Garton Ash, 1999; Dingsdale, 2002). “Since 1989, one cannot yet speak of central Europe as a well-defined identity in a popular sense;” the idea remains “an elite project” (Fawn, 2002: 66). Others have concluded “that notions of a centre of Europe have been, and still are, idle ruminations with little or no foundation in fact and hardly any influence on practical politics” (Roobol, 1999: 15). Yet, it may be unfair to say that the project has failed, since it was never intended to construct separate spaces, rather, as argued here, facilitate movement from one imagined geopolitical region, the East, to another, the West, by challenging the established regional geography of Cold War Europe. In this respect, the idea of Central Europe has proven to be a powerful rhetorical devise in ultimately helping Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians redefine themselves as Western and therefore the leading candidates for membership in the EU and other Western institutions.

This imagined progression toward the West could be found at the height of the debate in the 1990 special issue of Daedalus entitled Eastern Europe ... Central Europe ... Europe. ‘Eastern Europe’ referred to the Cold War East, ‘Central Europe’ pointed to the ideas of a central space revived during the 1980s, while ‘Europe’ represented the final destination. The political saliency and popularity of the slogan ‘return to Europe’ make little sense without reference to this imagined geography.
While some may have advocated a Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, most Polish, Czech, and Hungarian leaders envisioned a slightly enlarged EU and NATO with themselves as the obvious candidates for membership. As a member of Poland’s office for EU integration bluntly stated: “Imagine there is a river running through Europe, dividing east from west. We have to make sure we are on the right side of the river” (Rachman, 2001: 8). Here, ‘right’ refers to the ‘correct’ side, not a spatial direction. While looking at a conventional map of Europe, Eastern Europe would be on the right-hand side, clearly not the side favored by the official. As the nations of the center passed through the intermediary stages of their journey to ‘return to Europe,’ the need to promote a Central European space and identity became counterproductive. Garton Ash, who proclaimed in 1986 that Central Europe was back, was asking “where is Central Europe now?” by the end of the 1990s (Garton Ash, 1999: 383). The Economist recently described Central Europe as “a place where people want to negate their geography” (“Where is Central Europe?”, 2000: 49). It is perhaps more than symbolic that Cross Currents, founded in 1982 to promote a Central European culture and identity, ceased publication in 1993.

In many respects, the East–West dichotomy has continued to serve as Europe’s dominant geographical paradigm despite the end of the Cold War, although important shifts and debates over new lines of demarcation and definition are underway (Pond, 1996; Burgess, 1997; Tunander, Baev, & Einaigel, 1997; Emerson, 1998; Murray & Holmes, 1998; Mayhew, 1998; Pinder, 1998; Hudson & Williams, 1999; Connor, 2000; Hall & Danta, 2000; Szajkowski & Borragán, 2000). Although the idea of the East as a ‘former communist’ region is much criticized and rapidly losing its utility as time elapses since the communist period, finding a suitable alternative has proven difficult (for example, “Where- or What- is Eastern Europe?”, 1996). Indeed, numerous other regions in addition to Central Europe have resurfaced as we continue searching for useful ways of conceptualizing the divergent experiences of the post-communist states.

Some have pointed to differing levels of democratization as a key feature of a new divide (Painter, 1999; Rupnik, 1999; Rose, 2001). Another common alternative to defining the East by its communist past has been to define the region by its violent nationalist present (Dogan, 1997; Jeszenszky, 1997; Todorova, 1997; Auer, 2000). Other views may stress crime, unwanted immigration, economic backwardness, or other factors, but the East continues to be cast in decidedly negative terms. While the seemingly politically neutral ‘East Central Europe’ has become increasingly popular (Janos, 2000; Turnock, 2001; Wandycz, 2001), others have primarily seen the use of this term as an attempt to distance the region from Orthodox and Balkan areas since there is seldom discussion of any West Central Europe (Connor, 2000). Others have simply continued using ‘Eastern Europe’ to refer to the entire region (Burgess, 1997; Bideleux & Jeffries, 1998; Roskin, 2002). It is also possible to look at Europe in terms of North and South, but this remains largely overshadowed by the continuing discourse of East and West. Perhaps ‘Central and Eastern Europe’ is the least politicized term for the region, but that consensus would quickly give way if one had to be more specific about exactly which countries were Central and which were Eastern.

Dingsdale (1999, 2002) recently divided the post-communist states into four main
regions: Central Europe, Balkan, Baltic, and Eastern Borderlands. For Dingsdale, Central Europe included the four Visegrád countries plus Slovenia. Dingsdale argued Central Europe was “being produced in discourse and in material practices by a synthesis of historical-cultural traditions, practical economic and political associations and intensified links with Western Europe that differentiate it from other areas” (Dingsdale, 2002: 267). This idea of Central Europe was, like previous ideas, partially characterized by closer ties to Western Europe. Indeed, connections to the West or lack thereof are key factors in shaping perceptions and regionalizations of the post-communist states.

Rather than overcoming the East–West division of Europe, the revival of a new center can be seen as a preliminary step in efforts to redefine this distinction. The Iron Curtain has fallen, but in many respects a new East–West division in Europe, a so-called “lace curtain” to separate an enlarged EU from its new eastern neighbors, is already “being carved through the heart of Europe” (Hearst, 2000). The EU and Poland have already begun work on “plugging holes on the eastern border” with Ukraine and Belarus in preparation for Poland’s accession (Valencia, 2001: 10). “Communist rule has collapsed and the Cold War has ended, but the institutionalized East–West partition of Europe remains largely intact” (Bideleux & Jeffries, 1998: 520). Throughout this process, the geopolitics of naming continues to play a key role in defining and institutionalizing the meaning and extent of the idea of Europe and its relation to the post-communist states.

One need only peruse recent international news coverage to find examples of how this imagined geography and the power of naming continue to frame contemporary discourses on geopolitical, cultural, and economic issues (“First Question for Europe: Is Turkey Really European?” Kinzer, 1999; “Croats can Choose West or Isolation” 2000; “Where is Central Europe?”, 2000; “Joining the West” Rachman, 2001; “Looking West, Looking East” Valencia, 2001). Although political and cultural elites rarely map out these imagined geographies, an increased awareness of the power of language and the use of spatial metaphors, such as the ‘return to Europe,’ can help one sketch the outline of these geographies and gain greater insight into how these geographies are helping to shape the Europe of the next century.

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