

## BOOK REVIEW SECTION

**Kazharski, A.: Central Europe Thirty Years after the Fall of Communism. A return to a Margin?** Lanham, Lexington Books, 2022. 226 p.

At an international academic conference in Bratislava in June 2022, Aliaksei KAZHARSKI began his book presentation by acknowledging that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had rendered his newly published study, *Central Europe Thirty Years after the Fall of Communism*, outdated. The war drastically altered Central European politics in the four months between February and June. At the time of KAZHARSKI's presentation, the war had become the predominant geopolitical issue in the region, overshadowing the EU migration crisis and Covid pandemic, which are the main themes of his book.

In relation to the war, two significant changes had taken place in the geopolitical landscape of Central Europe. Firstly, the unity among the countries of the Visegrad Group that formed over the migration issue in 2015 had dissipated due to Hungary's neutrality towards the war and its continued cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have

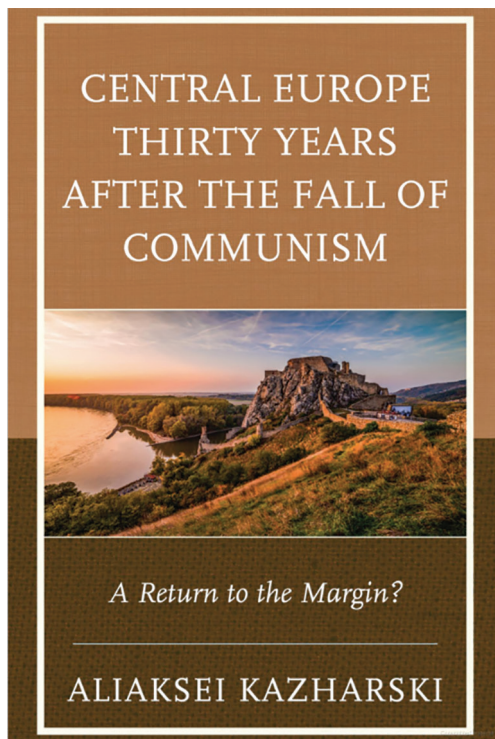
actively supported Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion and made substantial contributions to their neighbour's defence. Secondly, these efforts have led many journalists and analysts to argue that the centre of power in Europe is shifting eastwards and away from France and Germany (ERLANGER, S. 2023).

Nevertheless, these geopolitical transformations have not reduced the relevance or usefulness of KAZHARSKI's book. In fact, its significance has increased due to the unexpected timing of its publication coinciding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the book has become the most up-to-date source on the bygone era of Central European politics. KAZHARSKI demonstrates exceptional expertise in the politics and history of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, which is truly remarkable. Through a combination of rich empirical area studies and International Relations theorization, the book offers a unique and insightful contribution to the field. Furthermore, the study provides a necessary comparative basis for understanding the changes and continuities in Central European geopolitics after February 2022. Hence, it should be read because of the changes that have occurred in the region since its publication, not in spite of them.

The book examines the evolution of perceptions surrounding Central Europe over a thirty-year period encompassing the 1989 revolutions in the former Eastern Bloc and the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. The author's initial contention is that the dominant geopolitical understanding of Central Europe was transformed by the 2015 European Union debates on migration policy and the refugee redistribution plan, widely known as the migration crisis in Europe.

Prior to this, the dominant geopolitical meaning of Central Europe was that of a region transitioning from the Russian-dominated Eastern Bloc to its rightful place in the West. This narrative was realized through the integration processes of the EU and NATO and the eventual membership of the former Warsaw Pact states in these Euro-Atlantic institutions.

However, the enthusiasm for Europe in Central Europe gradually waned in the face of persistent economic disparity and diverging social values between the EU's eastern and western member states. This inequality paved the way for the geopolitization of regional differences in the context of the 2015 migration crisis. To defend their rejection of the EU's policy of refugee redistribution, the Visegrad Group (V4) countries, led by populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán



and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, redefined a new Central Europe as a racially homogeneous, Christian, and conservative moral centre of the EU. They aimed to spearhead a cultural counter-revolution, reimagining Europe as a culturally and politically conservative union of nation-states rather than a federation governed by supranational institutions from Brussels.

In the book, Central Europe is treated as a region-building discourse rather than an objectively defined geographical region. The author focuses on the shifting meanings and contexts of Central Europe without attempting to establish its geographical boundaries. Through an examination of moments of discursive change, KAZHARSKI identifies a continuity in the ever-changing concept of Central Europe since its emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This continuity is reflected in the aspiration to escape marginality and assert belonging to Europe's core.

Different meanings of Central Europe may suggest different strategies for achieving this aim, but at their core, they all serve to emphasize the political, economic, cultural, moral, or historical centrality of the region within Europe. The two dominant narratives of Central Europe in the past three decades – the post-1989 return to Europe and the post-2015 anti-migration region-building among the Visegrad Group – have both sought to bridge the inequality gap with Western Europe, but through different means. The former sought to imitate and adopt Western norms, while the latter sought to advance local norms and ideas as a better alternative to existing Western ones, with the goal of establishing a new normative order in Europe.

Furthermore, the author delves into the policy contexts and institutional frameworks that underpin region-building efforts. The author asserts that the post-2015 rebellion of the Visegrad quartet is limited in both temporal and sectoral terms. Temporally, the region-building of Central Europe and its institutional representation in the form of the Visegrad Group is a specific, event-driven phenomenon that wanes as geopolitical context changes. Hence, KAZHARSKI characterizes post-2015 Central European region-building as *ad hoc regionalism*. In terms of policy sectors, the rebellion against Western European hegemony falls short, neglecting crucial areas such as the economy and security. The Visegrad economies are all dependent on Germany and other Western countries, while their defence and security policies are outsourced to NATO. As a result, the focus of their counter-hegemonic geopolitical efforts is restricted to cultural, demographic, and migration policies.

Despite their counter-hegemonic posture, the Visegrad countries remain deeply enmeshed in the institutional structures of the Western-dominated economic and political order from which they benefit. The author uses the term *embedded revisionism* to describe this dynamic, in which revisionist actors are not entirely rejecting the status quo but instead selectively challenging it from within. This nuanced take on Central

European geopolitics offers a compelling lens through which to analyse the region's ongoing efforts to escape marginality and assert its place at the core of Europe.

Finally, the author posits that embeddedness and revisionism are not necessarily at odds. In fact, embeddedness affords the possibility of revisionism. As the EU and NATO manage issues such as the economy and security, where the Visegrad countries lack consensus, these nations can concentrate their political efforts on areas of agreement. These common ground issues provide the foundation for their counter-hegemonic efforts.

There are two issues that I found problematic and confusing about the book's theoretical arguments. Firstly, the argument regarding the post-2015 shift in the meaning of Central Europe rests on a misperception of the normative divide between Western Europe and the Visegrad Group. The author's assertion that the migration crisis led to a normative rupture between the two geographical regions of the EU lacks adequate evidence and reifies politically motivated geopolitical narratives. Anti-migrant political movements promoting civilizationist visions of Europe exist in both parts of the continent (BRUBAKER, R. 2017; CASAGLIA, A. *et al.* 2020). Meanwhile, despite its purported embrace of multiculturalism and refugee welcoming policies, the Western European mainstream has implemented a violent and brutal border policy towards migrants, resulting in numerous deaths at Europe's land borders and in the Mediterranean. There is evidence of the continuity between the EU's migration policy and Central Europe's rejection of immigration (KALLIUS, A. 2016), such as Hungary's southern border fence, which Viktor Orbán justified based on the existence of Spain's anti-migrant fortifications in Ceuta and Melilla.

To the author's credit, several times throughout the book, he mentions that we should not overstate the East-West divide and acknowledges the existence of multiple viewpoints within the same place. Yet, this acknowledgement does not change the book's central line of reasoning.

Furthermore, the author's treatment of the supposed divide between Western and Central Europe in the context of the migration crisis raises serious questions about the critical distance necessary in analysing political discourse. The "East-West clash" is a political narrative pushed by the likes of Orbán to deflect criticism of their illiberal policies. By accepting this geographic division as a neutral fact and positioning figures like Orbán solely on one side of the divide, the author fails to critically engage with politically motivated discourse. When the author argues that the "migration crisis revealed the largest normative gap between the great European powers such as Germany and the governments and societies of Central Europe" (p. 45), he (unintentionally) echoes Orbán's claim that "European citizens want something different from that which is put forward by most European governments. People want us to

defend our borders” (ORBÁN, V. 2015). Such slippage of political categories into academic language undermines the author’s goal of critically analysing politics.

Secondly, the author’s definition of Central Europe as a region-building discourse requires clarification. What does this definition refer to: an attempt to form a policy coalition or a political move to legitimize a particular stance by spatially framing a difference with an opponent? In the first scenario, Central Europe gains meaning through regional cooperation, while in the second scenario, it is established through the communication of external differences and regional political identity claims. This distinction is crucial, as the author defines Central Europe not as an objective reality but as a discourse in Chapter 1. Yet, Chapter 2 advances a new meaning of Central Europe based solely on the cooperation of countries on migration within the existing framework of the Visegrad Group.

In his description of the dominant version of the Central Europe discourse in the 1990s, the author shows how the perception of Central Europe as a “lost cousin” of Western Europe influenced the foreign policy priority of Euro-Atlantic integration in the former Socialist states. The author identifies not only a policy consensus among the region’s states but also the crucial role of the Kunderian myth of Central Europe in forming this consensus of *return to the West*. In contrast, when tracing the post-2015 shift towards a new vision of Central Europe, the author only highlights a policy consensus within the Visegrad Four (V4) and a normative division along the East-West geographical lines within the European Union (EU). However, what the author’s argument and discourse analysis lack is a demonstration of the centrality of Central Europe in V4’s policy discourse on migration.

The book’s initial chapters examine how the four Visegrad countries, through a partial identification with and revision of the EU normative order, have come together as an ad hoc institutionalized grouping. The subsequent chapters, however, highlight the differences in the domestic and individual perspectives on Europe among Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. Chapters 4 to 6 provide empirical details on how each member of the V4 pursued individual strategies to overcome marginalization in the post-2015 period.

In addition, each empirical chapter begins with a section in which the author provides an overview of the main geopolitical traditions and geographical imaginations that are derived from each country’s interpretation of its history. These historical-geographical narratives, analogies, and images play a significant role in shaping the geopolitical reasoning of contemporary politicians, serving as the building blocks for their current arguments. The reader is, thus, provided with an introduction to the historical geopolitics of the four countries, as well as a deeper understanding of contemporary politics.

In particular, the author notes that the governing elites of Slovakia and the Czech Republic have a similar understanding of Europe’s core and periphery,

but position their countries differently within this framework. The Slovak elites maintain that the country is part of the EU core, while the Czech elites adopt a more nuanced approach, seeing the country’s position in between the core and periphery as the most beneficial to its sovereignty. The author argues that this difference is due to a deep-seated fear of German encroachment on Czech sovereignty that is not present in Slovakian geopolitics.

In contrast, Poland and Hungary share many similarities in their strategies for dealing with marginality. Rather than accepting the existing European core-periphery spectrum, they seek to reorder it, promoting a new geographical imagination of Europe in which they are seen as the moral centre and heroic bastion of conservative, Christian Europe of nation-states.

The vision espoused by leaders such as Orbán and Kaczyński is distinct from the 1990s reorientation towards the West, yet it also echoes the 1980s dissident and romanticist discourse on Central Europe, which relied on a double othering of both the East (represented by the USSR/Russia) and the West (perceived as lacking in spirituality and culture). This discourse builds upon the tripartite geography of Europe, as conceptualized by Milan KUNDERA and earlier by Jenő SZÜCS, as discussed in the excellent genealogical overview presented in Chapter 1. It is fascinating to find how this contemporary illiberal and anti-Western discourse is rooted in a pre-existing geopolitical tradition that defines Europe in civilizational terms and positions Central Europe as the keeper of European culture that has been forgotten in the West.

However, the empirical chapters fall short of the expectations set by the book’s initial theoretical discussions. Rather than exploring how each V4 country leverages the discourse on Central Europe to position itself within Europe, the analysis primarily focuses on state-centric discourses with limited consideration of the regional scale. As a result, the concept of Central Europe is largely absent from the discourse analysis presented in these chapters, including the final chapter on the pandemic. This represents a missed opportunity to examine and assess the book’s central thesis through specific case studies, and to determine the extent to which the discourse on Central Europe as a geopolitical trope for escaping marginality features in national politics.

Based on the sample of geopolitical discourse analysed in the book, the reader will find little evidence that Central Europe as a region-building discourse has any influence on domestic debates about core-periphery relationships, either as a counter-hegemonic strategy or as a vision for unification with the dominant core. On the contrary, the empirical data presented in the book indicates that these debates are inward-looking and centred on the state and the nation. As the author notes at the end of the Czech-Slovak chapter, “small states construct the core-periphery relations for themselves” (p. 103).

In the book's final chapter, the author examines the impact of the Covid pandemic on previously established "Central European revisionist political discourses." Despite initially suggesting that this would shed light on the changing nature of Central Europe as a counter-hegemonic region-building discourse, the chapter focuses on how the pandemic altered the relationship between three scales of geographical identification: national, European, and global. The analysis shows that the Visegrad countries maintained their strong counter-hegemonic stance towards Europe, but the geographical landscape shifted, with the national scale emerging as the dominant image of the self. Meanwhile, the European and global scales saw increased securitization and othering.

In conclusion, the book's last chapter offers an insightful analysis of the reconfiguration of geographical scales during the pandemic, but falls short in its examination of Central Europe as a region-building discourse.

Ultimately, the book offers a compelling conceptual framework to comprehend the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region. In our current context, the image of Central Europe as a moral centre continues to hold sway, particularly in the political discourses of Poland and Hungary. Poland, for instance, has assumed a leadership role in the European effort to support Ukraine's defence of its sovereign statehood. The towns of Rzeszów and Przemyśl, in south-eastern Poland, have emerged as the main logistical hub for Western aid to Ukraine and a key conduit for Ukrainian refugees seeking safety. Despite its peripheral location in topographical terms, this area has become Europe's geopolitical centre in the ongoing war. Hungary on the other hand, has adopted a different stance, maintaining neutrality in the war and preserving its ties with Russia. Prime Minister Orbán has positioned himself as the sole European leader advocating for peace, casting Hungary as an "island of peace" in a sea of conflict (ORBÁN, V. 2022). Although this stance represents an immoral attempt to justify continued cooperation with Russia, Orbán has used this strategy to claim a moral high ground in the European geopolitical landscape.

The Polish-Hungarian rift has taken a toll on the Visegrad Group as a collective, yet Central Europe appears to have only gained influence. The firm pro-Ukrainian policy of the region's countries, with the exception of Hungary, has become hegemonic, in large part due to the backing of the United States, which Germany and France now follow, sometimes reluctantly. However, this increase in influence has also resulted in two key shifts. Firstly, the concept of Central Europe has evolved from previous crisis periods, now standing for Atlanticism and anti-Russian geopolitics, rather than cultural counter-revolution and Christian illiberalism. Secondly, the Visegrad quartet has given way to a new regional alignment, which has shifted northward and slightly eastward to include the Baltic states and Finland.

It is too soon to predict the long-term impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the core-periphery geog-

raphies in Europe. Despite the increased influence of Central and Eastern European states, Western Europe, led by Germany and France, still holds greater economic and political power. The book's notion of *ad hoc regionalism* accurately reflects the current state of affairs. It is uncertain whether the newly formed regional cohesion, which includes the Baltic states and Finland but excludes Hungary, can endure beyond the war and pose a challenge to the Franco-German hegemony in Europe.

However, this shift in the political-geographical landscape between Western Europe and Russia could result in the term "Central Europe" losing its relevance as a geographical description for the emerging regionalism. Paradoxically, despite its increasing geopolitical sway, Central Europe may become an unintended casualty of the war.

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**Acknowledgement:** This publication has been made within the project "Peripheral Geopolitics" (PD 139188), supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (NKFIH) via Postdoctoral Excellence Programme.

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