

## The region Central and Eastern Europe

### Approach of geography and religious study

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The geographical unit called East-Central Europe is not a self-evident unit in a geographical, topographical, historical or even political sense but a created space, a constructed area. Or as we read in SAGE's handbook of comparative politics, "traditional area studies boundaries are defined in a way that are theoretically and empirically arbitrary" (Hanson, 2009, 170). As stated in the example, we tend to define the Post-Soviet politics and society within boundaries of strong Leninism, however, this does not "justify grouping Tajikistan and Slovenia in the same typological category – two decades after the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe" (ibid). Hence it is advisable that we consider areas based on the processes and aspects creating them. One should especially bid farewell to the concept of divided Europe that emerged after the Second World War and is still routinely applied.<sup>1</sup> When attempting to analyze the religious dimension of the region, we should clarify the area our analysis focuses on. Hence, in the present chapter I shall attempt this clarification, on one hand, from a geographical<sup>2</sup>, and on the other hand, from a religious studies aspect.

Ever since the inception of Strabo's *Geographika* (25-27 AD) the demand to know, understand and scientifically survey – together and separately – different regions, continents (back then Asia, Europe, Libya/Africa) was present in the geographical, or more broadly speaking, the socio-political thinking. Since one of the goals of Strabo and latter geographers was to provide useful information for statesmen and military commanders, the description of states (politically organized areas) and different nations has had a prominent place in their geographical surveys.

As a matter of fact, the history of geography can be defined as a history of a state serving science. Indeed, following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, the ruler of the unified, new German Empire has supported the simultaneous establishing of twelve geography departments, consequently, establishing geography as a "german science" for decades. Also, the new geography predominantly concentrated on Europe.

Whenever we approach an area, region, country, block of countries, etc. it has to be an inter- and multidisciplinary approach because their functional, value, interest, and community factors present and assert themselves in accumulation.

The many variations of the name assigned to the area between the Russian and German dwellings, countries in itself demonstrates the wide issues this particular region raises in terms of definition: Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Middle Europe, Eastern and East-Central Europe, Central and East Central Europe, Central-East Europe, Russia and Eastern Europe, Russia and East Central Europe. The sheer multitude of these signifiers alone testifies to the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Béla Tomka also uses the term East Central Europe in his seminal monograph on the social history of Europe, however, the term refers merely to three Central European countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary), while the Balkan countries (without Greece) are referred to as South-Eastern Europe (Tomka, 2013, 4).

<sup>2</sup> In geographical and topographical issues I have heavily relied on Prof. Zoltán Hajdú's assistance.

complex nature of the attempt at defining, limiting the area either because of the complexity of the region itself, or because of issues and problems related to space-perception, space-community, and interest- and value-community. This naming confusion is not merely a space-perception issue, but a sign that the scientific research of this complex area has yet to grapple with its content and functional aspects.

Defining a geographical area, East Central Europe included, is not as simple and obvious as leaning over a contemporary map would suggest. Namely, a map is not a fixed drawing, but a living, 'dangerous thing'. The representation of imagined, or of once existing states, or the drafting of a future goal on a map becomes an independent identity, and susceptible to manipulations. In case of Europe, almost all of its communities have an era of glory, when a given community played a significant, determining role in the continent's history. Maps representing once existing states may irritate the later, or present neighboring communities. Also of significant and sensitive nature is the issue of changing state borders, and the organization and disintegration of empires and states in the modernity that had opposing effects on communities. The victory, territorial gain and jubilation of the one were, at the same time, the failure, loss, and sorrow of the other.

The latest conditions and opportunities for the area's reordering were created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its alliance system from the beginning of the 1990s. The Euro-Atlantic Integration (NATO, European Union) became the defining process of the whole big area, with appearances of country blocks of different interpretations within EU bearing both functional and organizational content. However, the EU has again simplified the political, economic and organizational division of Europe into a bipartite approach: EU member countries vs. non-EU member countries. At the same time, the internal region development and the differing interests of the different regions have reorganized area wise the EU itself.

In the present chapter I intend to define the area applying two approaches in an attempt to survey the area's religious changes and their adequate interpretations. In the first part, from a geographical and cartographical approach, I will take a glance at the area's outline both as being part of Europe and as a unity perceived from outside Europe, along with the diversity of its names/signifiers and internal divisions. In the second part, building and deepening the previous stipulations, I will attempt to draft the major features of the area from a politological and religious-sociological point of view, as these features play important role in the interpretation of religious processes.

### Interpretations of the Area

When discussing area divisions and their interpretations we have to bear in mind numerous, simultaneously present aspects, elements, such as: topographic, cartographic, natural scientific (geological, physico-geographical, hidrological, plant and animal morphological, pedological, climatological, etc.), as well as sociological and historical, political, geopolitical, geostrategical, power related, value induced, interest-, region- and community focused, culturohistorical, etc. elements. Finding a common denominator for all of these is very hard, nigh impossible whether we attempt an analytical or synthetic survey. Consequently, it is

inevitable to resort to a certain level of generalization and prioritize some leitmotifs dictated by prevailing interests.<sup>3</sup>

In geographical, historical, social and religious sense each area should be perceived as a unity constructed by different aspects and logics. In order to find a proper theoretical frame suited for the area in question for the interpretation of its religious changes one needs to analyze the aspects of its construction processes.<sup>4</sup> In a sense this means the deconstruction of the eastern part of Europe, bifurcated by power interests in the wake of the Second World War, that is, the deconstruction of East Central Europe as this region concept seems to be most common one in the public discourses of the region, as well as in the academic discourses of sociology and religious studies. There are numerous possibilities for such a deconstruction. First, one must make the concept of socialism and of region – as it is defined by bifurcated Europe – relative by circumscribing the conditions and their fulfilment that would make this approach relevant in the first place. Subsequently, one must demonstrate the major trends of the region's historical changes, primarily, because the present state of the region can be understood and interpreted from the perspectives of dominant forces and their impacts going historically far beyond the past 50-70-90 years. Building partly on these historical factors, and partly on further politico-geographical aspects, one needs to establish the main region-specific features. Finally, consistently following the deconstruction of the region discourse, one has to question whether we can talk at all of an East Central European region, or if it were more accurate to state the this region has lost its plausibility as a discursive concept.

#### The “Europe-Problem”

The issue of further territorial divisions of the unified globe has become historically one of the basic questions of geography. There have been differences in opinions even on the level of the macro-structural division of Earth (continents), with contemporary debates and questions rendering previous metageographical<sup>5</sup> claims even more tenuous and uncertain. For example, related to my present topic: is Europe a separate continent or should it be perceived ‘merely’ as a peninsula of Eurasia, the combined continental landmass of Europe and Asia? According to the majority of natural geographers, from a pure geographical point of view, Europe is hardly a separate continent, however, due to historical and cultural aspects it is still perceived as such.

The “Europe-problem”, and the establishing of its eastern borders has become an universal question of European geography transcending the narrow confines of the Russian geography's ‘competence’. The Ural Mountains, as marker of Europe's eastern border have developed and become accepted only gradually. The search for Europe's physical – natural border has gone on for centuries until the suggestion of the Ural boundary became near-universal in the nineteenth century (Lewis & Wigen, 1997, 27-28). The Russian Empire, spanning three continents before the sold Alaska (1867), has perceived and divided its Eurasian part into

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<sup>3</sup> By area division I do not mean simple ‘territorial spreading’ but in most cases the appearance of functional and organizational elements. Were it merely divisional approach it would be fairly ‘easy’ to define homogeneous regions.

<sup>4</sup> My postulates in this section heavily rely on Anssi Paasi's works on the construction and deconstruction of geographic regions (Paasi, 1986; 1995; Granö, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> I am referring here to Lewis and Wigen definition of *metageography* as a “set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world: the often unconscious frameworks that organize studies of history, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, or even natural history” (Lewis & Wigen, 1997, ix).

European and Asian Russia. Although “European Russia” did not comprise a separate unity within the Empire, the Russia political, military and academic elite was always conscious of its specific features and its significance with the empire. According to the notions of Russian geography and cartography clarified by the end of the nineteenth century, the European part of the Russian Empire was in its entire European dimension perceived as Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of Europe was continuously changing in history and was, therefore, historically a ‘floating’ category. Its ‘acceptable’ (though not undisputable) boundaries have come to a relative settlement only by the end of the nineteenth century. However, new scientific approaches along with new results have sustained the debated to the present.

Throughout this historically shifting concept of Europe and its configurations one can perceive the assertion of a long term bifurcation. In the following, I will list its different manifestations.

For the helenistic community the bifurcation of Europe was manifested in the differentiation of the civilized Greek population from the uncivilized, cultureless barbarians who, at best, can “stammer” gibberish Greek.<sup>7</sup> For Alexander the Great the “dark, barbarous near-foreignness” of Europe held no interest, hence, directing his world conquering endeavors towards Asia. For the Roman Empire the bifurcation was manifested in the notion of the empire and its values within *limes* versus the wildness and barbarism ruling outside of *limes*. The Roman Empire tended to defend itself on the borders, rather than civilize outside of *limes*. In the Europe of early Christianity the principle of differentiation was the distinction between Christians and Heathens. The distribution of Christianity was besides church mission also a secular goal. The borders of Christian Europe were gradually pushed towards East.

Following the East-West Schism (1054), the “Roman Rite” and the “Byzantine Rite” (and their respective values) have only gradually become the principles of territorial division in Europe. The relationship between the two branches of Christianity had long been defined by antagonism, excommunication, and no cooperation. Moors and Tartars appeared as conquering enemies respectively in Hispania and in eastern parts of Europe attempting long time settlement. Both communities had significant influence on the structures of their dominance. Fundamentally, the Christian crusades were lacking European dimension, as they were primarily struggles between Christians and non-Christians (Infidels) for the liberation of the Holy Land. However, the crusades also exerted an influence on the development of the internal territorial identity of the Europeans because they provided occasions for a significant number of Western European masses to explore and know a part of the Balkan Peninsula, namely, the Danube Basin, and its internal relations and features.

Following the Reformation, the schism of the Roman Church (affecting not only geographical peripheries, but in a significant way the core territories of Europe) could not exert a continent wide influence, although the European religious wars had a significant impact on the territorial aspect of Europe. The Catholic-Protestant division of Europe went beyond religious, church issues, and became an aspect of politics, alliances, etc.

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<sup>6</sup> Russian geography was the only to embrace the ‘Easternness’ of the Empire’s European part without any reservations. Polish geographers before the First World War, of course, did not share this notion of their Russian counterparts in regard of the Polish territories under Russian Empire.

<sup>7</sup> I will elaborate this and the Christian/Pagan opposition relating on Koselleck (2004) in more detail later.

In terms of denominations, the basic structure of Europe has become tripartite (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), and its southern part had to face the challenge of Islam. The Ottoman Empire's long lasting dominion over Southern East Europe has implemented basic internal structural reorganizations, resulting in a unit isolated from Europe in almost all of its aspects and features.

With the economic, social, and technical revolution there is a gradual development of concept and the consciousness of the modern, developed West, and of the traditional, farming, underdeveloped part of the continent. The binary of the developed West and the underdeveloped East has become the organizing principle on many territories for almost 200 years.

The development and the transformation of modern systems of military alliances were fundamentally based on power interest, resulting in 'friend' and 'enemy' perceptions not only in politics, but in sciences and in broader social scenes too. The images of friends and enemies had significant roles in the territorial division of the continent. After the First World War, two new dividing, distinguishing factors emerge: on the one hand, the impact of Bolshevik revolution, and on the other hand, the dichotomy of 'winners and losers'. Consequently, bolshevism – democracy became the dominant fault line of territorial division. The Second World War rearranged and brought forth new (partly antagonistic) systems of alliances, and its end created new winners and new losers. In the forming cold war system that followed, it was the dichotomy of 'free vs communist' that gained dominance. This last distinguishing, dividing factor proved to be quite extensive due partly to the media revolution playing out at the same time (radio becoming omnipresent, mass production of televisions, cheap access to press).

### The Variety of Spatial Categories

Books are not the only ones having a narrative; so do scientific categories, including different spatial categories. European spatial categories are determined partially within the framework of the whole geographical continent, and partially reinterpreted by other scientific disciplines.

Without elaborating the changes affecting the inter-regional division of Europe, or the permanent reinterpretation of its conceptual and territorial elements, let me note that the issue at question has a history of ca. 2000 years, so even Strabo's descriptive geography mentioned in the introduction may be perceived as a 'work of synthesis'.

Each historical period had its own interpretation of Europe all of which had its own, specific inter-regional divisions. Underlining those internal divisions were a modicum regard for cardinal points and the assertion of other factors favored at the time. The combination of these resulted in a great number of inter-regional divisions.

As one of the geographical concepts of cardinal direction, Eastern Europe had a very long evolutionary trajectory within the developing discipline of geography, becoming one of geography's politically motivated spatial units. The dichotomy of East and West has appeared in a number of interpretations, however, looking from a religio-historical, -geographical and denominational perspective the permeation of the 'Roman (Western) Rite' versus the 'Byzantine (Eastern) Rite' has become a significant factor in territorial division.

Beside the defined territorial units and the spatial concepts of Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the spatial concept of Central East Europe and of East Central Europe also appeared in Hungarian academic debate already before 1945, albeit only on the margins. The research and interpretation of the spatial category of Eastern Central Europe gains momentum at the end of the 1960s, and becomes almost dominant in the 1970s and 1980s. The focus was predominantly on the Eastern territories of Central Europe, on the spatial unit between the Soviet Union and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

The position of the Russian Empire regarding Eastern Europe in the cartographic and geographic division of Europe was clear and simple: Western Europe was the territory spanning from the West of the Russian Empire's border, while Europe's Eastern part (Eastern Europe) was part of the Russian Empire. This notion was later asserted by the Soviet Union's cartography and geography too. The cover of the paperback edition of *Atlas Mira [World Atlas]* was already declaring that Western Europe (Zapadnaja Evropa) was to be found to the West from the Western borders of Soviet Union (irrespectively of the individual countries' socialist or capitalist political structure), while Eastern Europe was part of the Soviet Union unrelated to any other [part of Europe].<sup>9</sup>

The genesis of the concept of Central Europe can be defined on a shorter time span: following a division based on cardinal points there always remains a specific 'center' whose aspect cannot be defined cardinally because of the actual cohesion of territories. On the analogy of the "golden mean" there appeared gradually a "Center of Europe" and, following certain territorial and political reconfiguring, "Central Europe". Friedrich Neumann's *Mitteleuropa* (1915) and its notion of Central Europe was fundamentally determined by geopolitical and martial aspects.

In terms of cardinal directions and topography the spatial concept of East Central Europe can be defined as the territory comprising the central territories of Eastern Europe. Therefore, the basic question of division is how to define and circumscribe the spatial concept of Eastern Europe, and how to outline the boundary of its central territories.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps because of science's certain problem of social influences, the ideas having the most significant impact within the topic were articulated not by geographers but by historians. Halecki's monograph on the history of East Central Europe originally published in the United States (1952) is a synthesis of the works done between the two World Wars by Polish scholars and researchers of the region. In the last chapter he addressed the Soviet satellite area defined with the spatial definition of "beyond the iron curtain". He makes a clear distinction between the Soviet Union and the countries and people under its power influence, claiming that "the name East Central Europe seems most appropriate" (Halecki, 1980, 10) – for the lack of a better word.

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<sup>8</sup> György Enyedi (1930-2012), a seminal figure in the development of regional science (area studies) as an independent discipline, has dedicated an entire monograph to the interpretation of East Central Europe's economic geography (Enyedi 1978).

<sup>9</sup> This Soviet cartographic perception was not accepted in Hungary, nor in other 'friendly' countries – a fact that would have warranted a redefinition of their geographical positions.

<sup>10</sup> Possibilities of logical geographical divisions regarding Europe were suggested in a series of graphic illustrations by Ferenc Probáld, the doyen of the Hungarian regional geography.

After 1989-1990 starts a new process of reinterpretation within the region and outside of it. Magocsi's historical atlas (2002) defines Central and Eastern Europe as the territory between Germany and the new Russian Federation.<sup>11</sup>

If we highlight a single constituent in defining the international region (the religious division) one can isolate fairly big, homogenous units (Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church), however, the believer of the Protestant Churches do not occupy large, homogenous territories (apart from Northern Europe if we do not consider the diversity of the immigrants).

Determining an international region is always a process of intentional decision even in statistical cases. A good example for this is the issue of time zones and the interpretation of coexistence in the region of the Baltic states, Finland and Saint Petersburg. The political 'handling' of the time zones causes issues also within day to day networking, contacting.

The fundamental issue was not and is still not simply the construction, definition of big European regions, but the self-definition of the people, countries, national cultures situated particularly between the German and the Russian/Soviet territory.

#### External Perceptions and Divisions

Traditionally the UN divides the continents according to territorial groups named after the cardinal points, as the cardinal points do not carry (at least in principle) overtly political or other sensitive significances.

The definition of coexistence and the statistical or other sub structural divisions have caused and are still causing problems even for the UN. The collapse of the bipolar, cold war world and the disintegration of the former Socialist federations the world organization had to reconsider the statistic ordering of the states. Today, the UN and its Statistics Division divides Europe based on the four cardinal points. Three from the Soviet Union's successor states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) have been grouped with Northern Europe. The statistic group of Eastern Europe has remained very extensive, regardless of the countries' Euro-Atlantic integration: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, and Ukraine. (It is not surprising that not all of the states agree with this classification.)

Besides UN, some other significant international organization show interesting internal divisions of Europe in their statistical or multi-factored state arrangements. For example if we take a look at OECD's spatial perception of Central and Eastern Europe, it comprises the following countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the previously mentioned Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Consequently, these state arrangements can be in many cases organization dependent and determined.

If, in addition, we take a look at how certain states and their State Departments (Foreign Offices) view their interest systems and world views in terms of territorial divisions, it is quite

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<sup>11</sup> First published as *The Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* in 1993. In the introduction to the original edition the series editors have defined East Central Europe "as the lands between the linguistic frontier of the German- and Italian speaking peoples on the west and the political boundaries of the former Soviet Union on the east" (Magocsi, 2002, xi). While maintaining the geographical parameters of the region, the introduction acknowledges substantial change in the area's political structure since the inception of the Atlas in 1987 (ibid).

obvious that they do it differently, according to their own interests and territorial connections. All great powers view and map the world differently, Europe included:

The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs plays a significant role in the territorial division of the US' Department of State, meaning that in terms of its mission the US handles Europe, Russia, Turkey and territories of Transcaucasia jointly. The regional thinking and practice of the Russian Foreign Affairs is different: the Commonwealth of Independent States plays a significant role in it, while it allots Europe a separate role. The Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China distinguishes between the European region and the European and Central Asian Region, the first including the three Baltic states, while the later includes the remaining twelve successor states of the Soviet Union. Even without further examples one can see that, although, the historical-reconfigurations, and -processes of the recent past, along with geographical generalization have had an impact on the reconfiguration of interests, ultimately the regional and territorial divisions will always reflect the interests, value and strategic percepts of a given country applying those divisions.

### The Turn after the Regime Change

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the European socialist system of alliances has fundamentally changed not merely the geographical perception of Europe but its manifestations other areas too. 'Europe after the Cold War' has gained a new meaning as the previous Soviet allied European states and/or Soviet satellite states (re)gained their independence. The determining factors at the beginning of the 1990s were the external divisions following the disintegration and the reorganization among the countries, soon to be superseded by the spatial perception of the EU and its process of territorial expansion.

The disintegration of the socialist system of alliances has created new categories in academic and political discourse alike: 'post-communist', 'post-socialist', and following the collapse of the socialist federation: 'post-Soviet', 'post-Yugoslav', etc.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, and the tearing apart of Yugoslavia in a bloody war also meant that the territories and the population of the new emerging states were substantially smaller in comparison to the previous federations. The new states did not become homogenous in all of their aspects. In most of the cases the internal divisions (linguistic, religious, and social) merely shifted. The 'the ethnic group in power' changed also (in the Baltic states the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians replaced, in differing scales and proportions, the Russians in the structural formation of their states, while the Russian became the [language, religious, cultural, etc.] minority).

A certain national renaissance took place in most of the new states, accompanied in many cases with the revival of church life, and the growth of the churches' role – at least temporarily. The state goals were also fundamentally reformulated, and occasionally – given their previous position and state in the structure of federation – for the first time articulated. The new majority became the dominant determinant of values. This created conflicts with the minorities. The political democracies developing after the collapse of the previous social, economic and political system, and having in part general and in part unique purports, had many similar and at least as many differing specifics. Self-organized initiatives like the Visegrad Group (V4), the Pentagonale, etc. could generate merely superficial cooperation; nevertheless, they contributed to the stabilization of the area.

If we consider the territorial issue of the EU we might observe with the end of the Cold War an acceleration of the expansion process. With their previous sharp opposition none of the 'neutral' states (Austria, Finland, and Sweden) would have acceded to the EU in 1995. Nor would 2004 mark the largest single expansion of EU with ten countries becoming its member states. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, and in 2013 Croatia also became a full member.

The EU with its influence offered to the majority of the new member states a possibility of a historically deeply embedded civic society and social market economy. However, the period of economic crisis has shown that in most of the cases the compatibility of these states is limited. Economically they cannot compete with the economy of the core area; hence, they are basically reduced to being market to the Western companies offering more state of the art goods.<sup>12</sup>

After the Cold War and with the disintegration of the socialist bloc and its various organizations (e.g. COMECON) it became obvious that it will be the EU, its neighboring region, its relation to Russia as the determinant successor state of the former Soviet Union, and the movement of certain states that will define the basic structure of the European area.

Formed in the period of the collapse, the Visegrád Triangle (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary) became the Visegrád Four (V4) with the split of Czechoslovakia. Although regional cooperation seemed equally important from the four countries' perspective, however, it never raised to preeminence in any of the countries long term perspectives. (Expressed or not, the four countries perceived this organization as the core of Central Europe.)

Established as an intergovernmental forum in 1989 (Austria, Italy, Hungary, Yugoslavia) the Central European Initiative has gone through significant 'region-community-acceptance', and has now eighteen member states (Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine).

The Central European Initiative formally complies with the oft mentioned notion, namely, that Central Europe comprises (or might comprise) the small states situated in the region between Germany and Russia; however, there are huge differences between them in all aspects. The formal unity of the organization is more like an 'objective area' than a functional community in all of its aspects.

All of these integration processes and the expansion of organizational systems have resulted in obvious country arrangements, groups (UN member – non-UN members, EU members – non-EU members, members of the CIS – non-CIS members, etc.). The internal subdivisions of certain diverging regional configurations are organization specific (UN's RC North and RC South, EU's new and old member states, etc.).

All in all, the EU's process of enlargement has resulted in a significant territorial expansion towards East. It has integrated countries and territories differing significantly or partially from its previous, old member states. In its spatial/regional perception the division of 'old' and 'new' member states has become a decisive spatial category not only in the political discourse but in the political practice as well.

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<sup>12</sup> For a region centered survey of this see Bohle & Greskovits (2012).

However, this old-new dichotomy reveals only a part of the EU's internal diversity. (Although partially relying on this basic division,) the EU has a number of spatial, regional, state-group subsystems. For example, the Schengen – non Schengen, the Euro – non-Euro divisions ostentatiously affect the day to day lives of the citizens and the relations, the consequences of their mobility beyond state borders.

The EU is developing into a set of permanent and occasional coalitions, and of regional state-group subsystems. The interests and the organizational direction of the given state-groups provide the organizational impetus. Not all of the states are interested, or interested univocally in politics of cohesion and in regional politics.

On the scene of economic-monetary processes the territorial division is marked by 'net contributors' and 'net recipients'. The newest EU regional state-groups comprise the "Friend of Cohesion" category. Its fifteen, voluntarily joined member states: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain, as well as the not yet fully member-state Croatia, are in terms of geographical region, of their social, historical, etc. development very different from each other. Presently their congregation is motivated by an interest in a bigger share in EU's budget. At the present one can also perceive a 'banking union/against banking union' state-group division, however, its permanence and future is hard to foresee.

The British endeavors can bring forth new questions and/or the renaissance of old traditions of spatial perception. Britain's 'wavering' EU membership rises a new/reestablishes a historically British perception of Europe: 'us' and the undifferentiated 'continent' which in comparison is something confusing (and dark). In relation to our topic this issue is particularly interesting because it clearly shows how the given specifics, meanings, forms and judgments of political, economic, and organizational connections can basically change, reconfigure following an 'exit'.

The features revealed by the geographical-cartographical approach demonstrate the consistency and the fluidity of the region in question. They shed light on the concourse dynamics of its states and societies. Following in this footsteps one can further research the region's contemporary features, focusing on the politological, sociological and religious study approach to region interpretation.

The Societies of the Region

Historical Region Construction

The approach to the region called "East Central Europe" from the sciences of history and politics both confirm that the region's member states significantly differ from each other and yet maintain certain aspects that foster its perception as a unity. In the following I will mention only few works in which Hungarian historian elaborate their interpretations while reflecting on propositions found in the international bibliography of region(al) studies (area studies). The common denominator of these works is parallel presence of historical diversity and regional similarity. Based on this we can approach the region's countries as a common geographical and cultural unit. And since every scholar or research group applies a certain, rationally justified criterion in representing the region's uniqueness, it is quite obvious that the area cannot be perceived merely as a geographical condition, but also as a cultural unit created by scholarly discourse. Whenever we grasp the dominant motive, factor applied by the

author(s) in the establishing the construction of any given region-concept we also encounter a drawing of a hermeneutical borderline. The more one involves and expands this insight the more obvious the challenge becomes to critical interpret the drawing of that borderline. Historical works provide the foundation for such approach, while the political, sociological and religious studies interpretations spur as on to elaborate and develop critical interpretations.

Emil Niederhauser is one of the Hungarian historians, apart from Jenő Szűcs, whose work on the Eastern European region one has to consider the most. Before the turn of the first millennium East Central Europe was primarily characterized by the mixture of diverse ethnic groups living in the region and the lack of developed states. When approached from a historical perspective the region is basically a frontier, a marginal region. If observed from the West, it is the frontier of Frankish Empire, however, from East, the region is Byzantine frontier. In context of Early Middle Ages, the region was the conflict zone of interest collisions of the Western and the Eastern Church, by which collision I mean differences in worldviews, cultures, economic and political forms of government reaching up to the Enlightenment and in a certain way ostensible even in our present day, and not merely differences in confessions of faith or in rites. Besides these western and eastern influences the history of the region was affected by a strong third, martial and cultural influence: the advance of the Ottomans and Turks. The influences of these three power blocks formed and defined the three subregions of the East Central European region, the features of which can be detected to the present: the Western, the Eastern and the Balkan subregion. The centuries of the second millennium had seen the changing and alternating influence of these powers, the traces of which can be felt with particular emphasizes in the subregions even today (Niederhauser 2001).

This tripartite influence explains the need for state and nation sovereignty determining the formation of all of the region's societies depending on how much of this sovereignty they were able to procure in centuries past and/or how long they were able to maintain it.

A Hungarian research group, led by Endre Sashalmi and focusing on the region's history of political constitution, took into account Niederhauser's work, although not agreeing with many of his conclusions. The concept of the research and its main perspectives were set based on modified approaches of Ertmann and Finer, who in terms of government practices differentiated between substantive and procedural models. To the substantive model belong power limiting factors related to the principles and the essence of power to which, besides tradition and laws, belongs religion too (Sashalmi, 2007, 11ff). According to the researchers, all government forms classified according to different principles can be found both within Western and Eastern Europe, hence, erasing the differentiation between the East and West. However, there are some formations that can be seen as merely features of the subregions of the Eastern European region in its broadest sense. This again brings us to the ambivalence on the topic of regional peculiarity. Are there or are there no specific features distinguishing the regions? The comparative study spanning the historical period between 1000 and 1800 concludes that, based on the logic of succession of political power within Eastern Europe, it is by the fifteenth century that the government models of the Rus and the three Christian kingdoms diverge. Therefore, it is politico-historically justified to distinguish with the greater region East Central Europe from Eastern Europe (Sashalmi, 2007b, 398ff). By the eighteenth century this image of the region will become even more nuanced (Sashalmi, 2007b, 401), however, there is no present need to elaborate on it.

We would come to similar conclusion if we were to take a look at the conceptualization of the regional identity and the borders of “Central Europe”. This region, that is, the discursive construction of Europe’s certain territory as Central Europe has been sufficiently analyzed by the international debate of the 1980s that was partially described and partially summed up by the group of signifiers the authors participating in the debate used to signify this territory.<sup>13</sup> However, my aim is not to present the alternative conceptualizations of the region. My aim is to draw attention to the significance of region construction, how concepts and names of regions are intrinsically fluid, and most importantly to argue for my claim that the analysis of the region’s religious dimension must take into account the differing concepts of the region and not be satisfied with its schematic descriptions.

### Contemporary Region Construction

The 1990s European changes had, among else, an impact in the reinterpretation of Europe’s regions. As the politically based division ceased to exist, it was possible to redraw the continent’s subregions on new foundations, applying different criteria. This attempt was not so much ideologies and politics driven, as much as motivated by economic, commercial and bureaucratic rationalization. In the following I will list eight criteria playing significant role in separating Europe’s regions. From the many possibilities of approaches I have chosen a geographical approach stemming particularly from a certain introduction of the Central European region. Namely, this concept – the precursors of which go back to the first decades of the nineteenth century – appears in context of the relativisation of the continent’s political bipartition and reaches a certain renaissance. The criteria are phenotypical, that is, they are not based on a variety of exact economic, or demographic data and computation, but are aspect of European social development based on which one can precisely separate Central Europe. Consequently, if a delimitation of such a region in Europe is possible, so is it possible for others in comparison to this. (Cf Jordan, 2005 and the relevant bibliographi listed there.)

The separation the cultural regions of the European continent – as opposed to other approaches – has many advantages. It is based on criteria that had significant impact on the area, influencing people’s thinking and behavior, having lasting relevance on economic, political and social relations, and allowing presumably a much longer term relevant area division. Jordan and his coworker have developed eight factors/criteria – not necessitating a detailed introduction as there function here is merely to demonstrate the obvious constructedness of space in relation to which we are searching for theoretical frames suitable for the analysis of religious changes. I find the following summary of these criteria particularly useful, as they were developed on a broad scale of specialized bibliography including Hungarian publications (particularly works of Istvan Bibó and Jenő Szűcs, the latter being explicitly referenced in Jordan’s study):

- (1) The Jewish and German historical influence, having an impact on the Slavic, Romanian, Hungarian, etc. cultural layers asserting themselves outside of the region too.
- (2) The parallel influences on Catholicism and Protestantism (with a minor level of Orthodox and Islamic influence).
- (3) In comparison to Eastern and Northern Europe, the early development of the urban system and the citizenship, as opposed to nobility, feudal lords and church dignities.

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<sup>13</sup> I have already listed some variations in the introduction.

- (4) The early appearance of liberated peasantry.
- (5) The significance of the local and regional government as an after-effect of former political particularism.
- (6) The cultural (linguistics, religious) and ethnic diversity with the states.
- (7) Politics and economics focusing on the continent and not on the overseas.
- (8) Industrialization (developing later as in Western Europe, but earlier as in Eastern Europe).

Based on these criteria one can situate Central Europe as an area between the shipping, colonizing powers on the west and southwest, the Ottoman Empire with its huge, 300 years long influence on the southeast, the Byzantine Eastern Europe changed by the Slavic-Russian influence, and, finally, the purely protestant states of the Northern Europe (Jordan, 2005, 167).

#### Region Construction by Religious Data

The sensitive outlining of the East Central European cultural region theory based upon religious relations approach needs to start by situating it within and between European societies and countries. The theoretical sensitivity requires that we categorize the European countries by a certain category in order to identify the states we can deem East Central European. As I shall elaborate in the section on the secularization paradigm, the approach of categorization from a primarily religious side is following this principle. As opposed to the superficial and schematic political treatment, according to which the in Europe the free religious practice allowing West is pitted against the religion prosecuting East, the secularization paradigm studies the development of individual religiosity within given societies according to the factors/categories mentioned before. From this point of view draws together countries, states, that do not belong to the same political bloc, moreover, whose geographical situation, history, economic relations and present structure of society are significantly differing. However, based on the features of individual religiosity they stand very close to each other: they have a similarly low or high ratio of regular church attenders, of those practicing prayer, or of those who claim religious assistance for significant turns in their lives. Apart from the secularization paradigm nested within the more comprehensive theory of modernity, the theory of individualization shows similar results. The study of individualization primarily focuses on how loyalty towards large social institutions (traditionally also including the churches) is subverted, or in a given situations replaced by the significance of individual decisions regulating the closeness or the distance of ones relationship to those institutions. Besides the secularization paradigm and the theory of individualization, a third useful approach is that of rational choice theory whose criterion when applied to the study of religion primarily studies the relation of religious market supply to religious practice. The hypothesis of the theory based upon data collected in the American society is that where there are competing religious market supplies there are higher levels of religiosity.

The structural elements of the region's religious dimension do not reveal themselves strikingly enough when approached from these, almost classical, sociological and religious studies theories, since the mentioned three grand theories do not focus on these. Underlying these grand theories – particularly those of modernization and individualization – are the notions of the person and personal decisions, choices. To better understand the questions these approaches rise one has to apply other, new approaches. One such approach can be

socioeconomics focusing on the modernization of economics, thus, complementing the individualistic dimension of the modernization thesis. According to this theory modernized economic relations and welfare conditions have negative influence on reality. One other structural complementary aspect is that of sociopolitics focusing on the theoretical and practical aspects a political system bears on religious communities and on religion as such. It includes the most known political dichotomy, that of totalitarianism and democracy, although on the palette of political systems in Europe there are a number of alternative systems between these two extremities. Finally, considering the contemporary experience of East Central European societies, the cultural ethnic approach is of quite significance comprising partially the tradition of the main denominations and partially the question of the interrelation of the ethnic and religious borders.

Gert Pickel in his 2008 study entitled “Religiosity in European Comparison – Theoretical and Empirical Ideas” applies the same structural approach outlined above. Yet despite the application of the three structural aspects – secularization theory, theory of individualization, theory of pluralization and vitalization – when listing and arranging European countries within tables the main variable determining the arrangement is their geographical situation (see in particular table 9.2, but also 9.4, 9.5, and 9.6). His table (9.2, on page 188) obviously supports the claim that even from a structural position the religious approach will group societies of a certain geographic region to different groups. Applying the variable of geographical situation, Pickel distinguishes nine European subregions. One subgroup of the Eastern European countries is that of the countries with significant Catholic majority, representing medium economic power (however, clearly stronger than their neighboring countries further East): Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, and Lithuania. The determinant denomination of the countries south from the group above is Orthodox Christianity, however, low economic situation and circumstances resembling in many aspects previous Socialist relations are also common denominators: Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia-Montenegro. The region’s furthest Eastern countries are Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Belarus. In economical aspect they do not differ much from the previous group, however their societies bear the greatest imprint of the former Socialist’s legacy. According to Pickle, social conditions inducing the lowest religious level are those of North Eastern European countries: Estonia, Latvia and former East Germany. Compared to other countries, their economic level is fairly high; they have a low ratio of Catholic population and they traditionally maintain good relations with Western Europe. The last group in Pickel’s politico-religious arrangement includes the few Muslim countries of East Europe: Azerbaijan, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where high religious commitment is paired with low socioeconomic indicators (189-190). According to Pickel’s analysis the religious vitality of a given country is determined collectively by the structural factors mentioned before, the denominational division of related countries and the type of the former political system. This combined approach supports the assumption that, although one can show forth a positive connection between modernization and the vitality of religious life, the West-East division in Europe can be maintained only if we take into account as a variable the presence and aftermath of the pre 1990s political systems. However, if we were to disregard it, we would also need to part from the bipartite model of Europe. Pickel summarizes his results, referencing the post-socialist factor, as follows:

Most of the differences between the countries are effects of macro-processes and social circumstances. The modernization is the strongest factor to explain the state of

religious vitality. In general, it seems to be possible, to order the European countries into different groups, which have a homogenous structure within the groups and which have a heterogeneous structure between the groups. These groups are determined by the shown cut-lines of modernization (social-economic cut-line), postsocialism (the near history of the social-political cut-line) and the historical cultural-ethnic cut line. Therefore, a better understanding of the different starting points [following the system changes] and developments is possible. (Pickel, 2008, 210)

However, if we disregard the post-socialist factor – as the societies under discussion are getting farther and farther away from this politico-economic change of structure – our region interpretation can be built on contemporary data, and it would suffice to consider the socioeconomic, the denomination dividing and the ethnic constitutional factors. These of course are not independent from the “socialist relations” directly preceding the change; however, the differences between these countries are so significant that in comparison the significance of the “socialist relations” is diminishing. The merit of this approach lies in the fact that the political and economic system lasting until 1990 in different countries did not succumb equally, at the same time or in the same way, to an alternative political and economic system. Also the further we move from the vehement period of the change, the more the reference to the past loses its interpretative strength.

### Regional Change in Religion

The sociological interest in the countries of the region was reanimated following the change of 1990. The European Value Study (EVS), and the two data gathering of the Aufbruch (1997 and 2007) were the first to focus on the study of social and religious, church relations. The EVS collected data first in 1981 in numerous European countries, the East European countries not included. The 1990s data gathering was significantly expanded towards East: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.<sup>14</sup> Ten years later the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Croatia participate in the survey too. The Aufbruch survey in 1997 included ten East Central European countries, and in regard of religious and church changes, it was topically the most comprehensive survey of the region. The data gathering was repeated after ten years, complemented with four countries of Orthodox majority: Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldavia and Serbia. Important data survey was made also by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and Eurobarometer focusing on the region since 1973 and from 1990 opening towards Eastern Europe. However, these surveys contain only a few religious variables.

The possibility to survey previously isolates societies in itself explained the research interest, with the added incentive to test the theories based on the survey data of Western European and other regions. The question of regional separation (delimitation) was already raised in the first extended wave of EVS research (1990) and gradually reinforced in the succeeding surveys. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to claim that the primary result of public opinion polls was the relativisation of the unambiguousness of regional politics based segregation. Nevertheless, it is important to summarize those results of the regional surveys that somehow emphasize the region's specific features.

In regard to WVS data results related to “post-communist Europe” Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004, 131ff) conclude that there is no wave like movement of religiosity, nor a

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<sup>14</sup> Regional data of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

certain religious renaissance. Instead the data confirm that the state's anti-religious and anti-church regulations have caused a slow and even diminution of religiosity, its process more forceful than in Western Europe. One cannot experience among younger generations a (re)turn to the religion of their parents, or rather grandparents. Nor does the religious heterogeneity of this region generate competition between churches and, thus, a growth of religiosity, a tendency otherwise clearly expressed by USA surveys and sufficiently justified by Western European data. Norris and Inglehart claim in reference to Catholic Poland that homogeneous religious societies are more resistant to influences of modernization (and secularization) as opposed to heterogeneous societies. International comparisons also lead us to conclude that the explanation of the cultural and religious changes in the countries of the former Soviet bloc can be sufficiently explained by the variables specific to those countries. Consequently, based on these results, the religious data in all countries were influenced by the state impacts, however, the long-term development of the countries religiosity does not depend on regional, but on international-cultural features.

Tomka Miklós wrote his last book based on poll data focusing on religion in Europe. The title itself is telling: *Expanding Religion*. Based on survey data up to 2009 Tomka managed to show forth a few religious features that distinguish East Central Europe from the other regions of Europe, particularly from Western Europe. One such feature concerns the relationship between religion and the public sphere. In Western Europe there are many more people answering the poll that are against churches participating to larger extent in the public sphere as opposed to opinions in Eastern Europe. Also, people in the West perceive religion as creating conflicts rather than peace to greater extent than people in the East. According to poll participants in the West, religious people are more prone towards intolerance, an opinion shared to lesser extent in the East (M. Tomka, 2011, 32). One could summarize that the trust in religious institutions is greater in East Central Europe than in Western Europe (50), although the data show a drastic decline in that trust following its peak after the system change. And yet, if we compare the discrepancy between the level of trust people display towards churches and other social institutions than it is even more obvious that in the eastern part of Europe there is a greater trust in churches than in its western part.

Contrary to the conclusions of Norris and Inglehart, and based on differently combined data, Tomka claims that there is significant difference in how the societies of Western and Eastern Europe perceive the level of religiosity. The majority of those participation in the poll from the Eastern European countries were of the opinion that religiosity has grown in comparison with the previous era, although, according to survey data of 2007 this opinion seems to decline too (M. Tomka, 2011, 66). However, there are so many discrepancies among the countries of the region in this respect that arguing with average results is not debating but simply concealing the differences between the region's societies. It is enough if we consider Romania and the Czech Republic, or Poland and the former East Germany, or not at least Serbia and Croatia. All of these countries have experienced to a similar degree an anti-religious sentiments, however, the level of religiosity, and the their opinions regarding religious institutions is as diverging as if they belonged not to the same region at all.

The ESS results also seem to confirm Norris and Inglehart's deduction, namely, based on the religious variables it would be hard, if at all possible to distinguish the East Central European region from the other regions of Europe. For although religiosity, and the dedication to a religious community seem to be the feature of countries of primarily Catholic dominance (Poland, Ireland), one can just as well find among them East Central European countries as

countries from the other regions, even among the groups of lesser religious status. The analyses distinguished between the group abandoning church and the group never belonging to a church as the *first and second generation belonging*. The list of European countries established on the ratio between the two groups does not show regional relevance. The four countries showing the greatest ratio of second generation are Estonia, Czech Republic, Sweden and Belgium, while the smallest ratio of second generation is present in Turkey, Poland, Ireland and Greece. These countries can hardly be arranged within the same group based on their denominational, historical, or political structures.

So, the question raised by the researchers is logical: according to the survey data what social background variables explain the variation of religious dedication? There is a still heavily debated (by sociologists) theory behind this question, namely that political and religious decision and choices are more and more individualized, shifting to the realm of personal. Hence, the decreasing force of social background variables to explain the data. While there are numerous studies proving the diminution of the significance once assigned to social variables, other still maintain and show their continuous presence and influence. One might venture an hypothetically claim, namely, that in countries with low ratio of religious dedication there is also decline in the significance of the social background variables. In addition the analyses show women to be more religious irrespectively whether they are from Western or Eastern countries. Also, based on the age variable, older people tend to be more religious than the younger ones in all countries. However, in terms of the educational variable the picture is not so clear cut. In some countries the lower educational level is paired with lower, in other countries with higher level of religiosity. The analysis of these data is impossible without further analysis of the educational system of the countries. In terms of the dwelling variable the results direct us toward the conclusion that the more urban and industrial the dwelling the lower the level of religiosity.<sup>15</sup> Although the social background variables do not seem to provide unambiguous results in explaining different levels of religiosity (especially since the survey data stem from a single polling), they provide a base that makes the classification of the surveyed countries possible. The countries with the greatest explaining force are Ireland, Greece and Portugal, while countries of the lowest explaining force are Sweden, Hungary, Netherlands, Denmark, United Kingdom, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Finally, comparing the relationship between the value system of the poll participants and their religiosity, there were two variables showing obvious relation to religious dedication: conservatism and the level of trust in social institutions. However, not even from this aspect can countries be grouped into distinguished groups.

We could go on and on analyzing other survey researches, however, all of them come to a more or less similar conclusion, namely, that the past prior to the system change only partially explains contemporary religious data, and although there are some regional features they do not provide as clear cut region outline as the political based arrangement would suggest.

### Regional Markers

So far I have attempted to define the East Central European region from diverse social studies perspectives. Apart from the interdisciplinary nature of this undertaking I was governed by the goal to specify characteristics that apply to the region's societies not merely regarding a

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<sup>15</sup> Except in the case of ten countries which still comprises more than one third of the surveyed countries.

few decades, nor merely the period after the fall of the socialist regimes, but rather attribute that root more deeply in earlier history. As a way of conclusion, I would like to summarize the most important features, the ones that make this region a unique part of the world or even of Europe as a whole, and which distinguish societies of this region. This idea is reflected by the term “marker” in the title of the present chapter, borrowed from molecular biology. Religious studies regard religion and religious changes as one among the dimensions of a society. In order to interpret religious changes in East Central Europe, we need to be able to identify the markers that make this region specific and which help religious studies in investigating regional nuances of the religious dimension of societies as well as the changes regarding these characteristics. The first marker is transitoriness versus stability, the second is the state’s status as colonial versus sovereign, while the third is the multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages. According to our results these are the most important features as well as the crucial challenges which influence the dynamics of the societies in the region. The task to interpret these markers is key to social studies, including religious studies.

### **Transitoriness – crisis and what comes after it**

Following the system change in the 1990s, sociologists, economists and politicians characterized the East Central European region primarily as undergoing a transition. Immediately after the change societies of the region were indeed faced with the huge challenge of transition from the one-party system of socialism and command economy to a multi-party system and market economy. The most important attribute of the region in this period is certainly the mentioned transition. However, from a structural point of view one may say that the transition has come to its end. The fundamental constitutional and political institutions of democracy have been established, and the state has withdrawn from the market or was forced to yield its position. Thus, from this structural point of view these transitions should be regarded as completed. In case we still wish to label the region as transitory, we certainly mean types of transition other than political: post-socialist democracy and market economy, the entirety of regional attributes of democracy and market economy – attributes that are supposedly universal. In the 20 years following the fall of the regime, however, changes and crises appeared that made transition a global phenomenon. We need to take into consideration the major changes of focus in the meaning of the *transition* when discussing the most important characteristics of the East Central European region in terms of its contemporary religious changes and their interpretations.

#### **Need for State Sovereignty under Pressures of Hegemonies**

In the millenium long history of the state formations and republics of the region, we can distinguish between three types of state sovereignty. The criteria apply to formally independent state formations only. In other words, details in the history of countries are not regarded, neither is the discourse of autointerpretation and heterointerpretation taken into consideration. The first type is characterized by long sovereignty, the second by the lack of sovereignty, while the third by short sovereignty, and we can make these claims only when relying on the possibly most formal criteria. Poland, Lithuania and Hungary belong to the first group; Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Serbia to the second, while Bosnia-Herzegovina, Estonia, Latvia, Macedonia, Montenegro, the former East Germany and Romania to the third.

If we focus only on the twentieth century for the same reason, we can see that the lack of sovereignty was becoming more dominant in the pre WW2 period, and the same characteristic became almost overall when the region was attached to the Soviet zone following the war. After WW2 we can distinguish only between two groups, namely sovereign and non-sovereign states. Albania, Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Hungary and Romania belong to the first, while member states of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia belong to the second. Regarding state sovereignty, in the period after the war we can distinguish between states that formally maintained it, and those that formally lacked it. States with an independent head of state and parliament belong to the first group, although they were submitted to the Moscow leadership, while countries that became member states of the Soviet Union belong to the second group. Member states of Yugoslavia are a group of their own, forming Yugoslavia as an independent state formation, having different political ties to the Moscow leadership compared to other satellite states.

The picture drawn based on the history of sovereignties of the present day independent states shows that the present day state formations should be more properly regarded as states on their way from the lack of sovereignty towards sovereignty. This is a primary feature of the states within the region, their difference being the length of the time during which they lacked their already gained sovereignty. These differences are the primary indicators for the interpretation of public religious processes.

### Managing the Vacuum

Societies of the region, thus, have treated the issue of the system change in their own way, and according to their own historical traditions and social structures. No matter how different the elements of the change may be, as for their radical nature and their consequences, the old and the new states are similar regarding the fact that in the context of their gained or re-gained freedom, they were all forced to face the basic challenges that target diverse areas of society. Events of the change had proved, almost from the initial moments, that it is impossible to adapt an already existing successful political and economic model. The restructuring of social institutions has to be conducted rather according to one's own considerations and resources, with the existing models in mind. The political and economic system, which was problematic and paradoxical before the fall of the regime in several fields, was nevertheless still a system, with its own networks, routines and understandings. Once these were dissolved, societies were forced to create their own systems according to their values of freedom. The fall of the previous system happened at great speed, while the creation of a new system is a slow process. In the period directly following the system change, these countries suffered under the vacuum created by the lack of earlier structures and social logic of management, but the following period forced them to face the diverse difficulties of managing a society. As the *Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics* (2009) describes the situation, "[T]he main problem facing the new post-socialist regimes was not spreading the revolution but rather building new national institutions that could cope with the emergent private, criminal and bureaucratic entrepreneurs rushing to fill the vacuum" (Goldstone, 2009, 322).

During the period of the regime change, which in case of some countries started as early as the 1980s, societies of the region were following their increasingly diverse paths, however, in the process of change two phases may be detected in all of their cases. The first phase ends with the first free parliamentary elections, while the second phase continues up to the present. If the dynamics of change is examined regarding the characteristics of parliamentary parties,

most of the parties in the first phase were descendants of the earlier single party.<sup>16</sup> Real political diversity was rather brought by the second parliamentary elections, since by that time electors had already directly experienced the way and logic according to which parliamentary democracy functions, and they could see the differences between the promises of parties made before the elections, and their real parliamentary functioning. László Balogh groups the parties of the second phase into six categories (2012). Without citing the details of these categories, I wish to draw attention to one of its most outstanding results. The six party groups, based on Balogh's analysis, are the following: historically social democrat, social liberal, liberal, national Christian conservative, radical national, and ethnic national. Focusing on the two central terms of these groups it emerges that the labels *social* and *national* are crucial characteristics in all cases except one, while the attribute *liberal* appears only once, and *green* is entirely missing. I would like to return to this characteristic later on. What should be specified here is that after the period following the change directly, another period sets on. Parliamentary and other systems created during this second period may be adequately explained relying on a logic that is different from the one of the first phase.

### The End of East Central Europe?

The results, that we have arrived at based on our survey-based approach regarding the coherence and homogeneity of the region, are supported by the results of comparative political science as well. One of the most prominent representatives of this approach, Charles King (2010) writes about the diversity of post-communist experience, with an unequivocal but implicit reference to William James' *Varieties*. The clear message of his arguments and examples is that the answer to the above question whether comparative political science may effectively contribute to the better understanding of the societies of the region, is a *yes*. The more than twenty former communist countries transitioned from total democracy and planned economy to multiparty democracy and market economy almost in a single leap, however, from the outset of the transition it was increasingly clear that these countries treaded their own routes on the new political landscape. Compared to a few outstanding countries, most of them may be seen as belated. Also, it can be detected that regarding certain world indices these societies are given unfortunate positions. According to the index of Transparency International Corruption Perceptions the majority of these countries are situated at the bottom of the list, together with countries with higher than average corruption, for example Columbia or Uganda. The Northern countries of the region, at the same time, are in the first 50% of the list, with the exception of Latvia. These characteristics, especially the significant differences between them, raise the question even more urgently: How is it possible that these societies follow so significantly different routes, despite their common political and economic starting point. Studies that have attempted to answer this question recently have three traits in common. First, when examining the institutional dimensions of the change, what is focused upon is not only the formal restructuring of the institutions, but also the way that this restructuring is embedded in the processes of real (post)communist society. Second, recent studies pay more attention to stability and state power than to the consequences arising from the tradition of informal contacts, which may even obstruct reforms. Finally, studies are deeply interested in the question of identity and the ethnic revival that has been gaining impetus since the 1980s (King, 2010, 88).

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<sup>16</sup> This is suggested by Emil Niederhauser too: the majority of the parties is essentially an offspring party (2001, 323).

Analysts of transition, taking into consideration the above approaches, arrive to the conclusion that the post-communist adaptation of a culture of managing and maintaining institutions that was developed in a Western context is frequently obstructed by an atomized state, weak civilian sphere and the survival of a certain “communist mentality”. The final question, however, regards the notion that would allow us to talk about “East Europe” within the categories and approaches of comparative politics. According to Jordan’s nuanced opinion (as a continuation of certain interpretive traditions, and due to attributes generally applicable to the region, e.g. the insufficient state of civil society’s development) – the region will retain an analytical role as a region, but with time going by, such a role would diminish. The younger generation of researchers has already suggested analytical approaches that disregard the common past that makes the public not only to suppose homogeneity within the region, but also to take it as obvious (King, 2010, 102).

The results of this fresh approach were heralded by Emil Niederhauser in his work published in 2001. In the last chapter he asks the question whether East Central Europe would retain its unique characteristic as a region. The region in a certain sense ceased to exist after the fall of the regime and the radical transition that followed. Or more precisely, a long period of development has ended for the region (320). As for the future, Niederhauser suggests that in a few decades no one will talk about East Europe, since by that time it will have merged into the European Union, and only Russia will remain, on its own, a Eurasian superpower. (327)

## Conclusion and Outlook

The descriptions of the East Central European region from the different approaches all underline, or rather emphasize one stipulation: whether we consider its distant or near past, or the hegemonies bearing on it from outside, or its inner divisions, based on a few features the region will remain distinguishable within Europe. The rim of the western, eastern and southern powers’ influence allow this collision zone to be considered region of its own with its ethnic, linguistic varieties and the diversity of its countries’ histories. One of its major features is transition, namely the vicissitude of its inner structure and of its relation to the three hegemonies. Because of this transition and fluidity, the region is characterized by the stressed significance of structures, and of the historical, and national traditions. The political, economic and structural change of the 1990s in reality did not cause but merely exacerbated the permanent transition characteristic of the region. In order to understand what one experiences within this region today, one needs to be aware of these overarching processes. The same is true if one wishes to find an adequate interpretative framework for the interpretation of the region’s contemporary religious relations.

The object of my religious studies research is, therefore, the East Central region in this sense. With all of the above my aim was to present a hermeneutics of region, thus, creating a foundation for our search for the adequate theoretical framework allowing a religious studies understanding of the region. The focus on the region implies further relations which I will elaborate in the followings. The first such relation is the relativisation of state, that is, national boundaries. In order to understand the countries, the member states of the region one must follow the path of understanding region specific features and trends. The history of a single state, or the specific relations of a single society cannot comprise the standard with which to measure and compare the rest. On the contrary. The starting point from which we can have a direct perception of a country or a group of states are the regional historical and cultural processes which include, although rarely done so, the religious processes as well. Another

implication is the criterion of choosing the appropriate theory suited for the survey of the region's religious dimension. Given all of the above, the relevant theories of religion are the ones allotting dominant role to the specific features of the region even if their assumptions are not based on regional experience. The theory of religion offers a number of theoretical frameworks for the diachronic and synchronic analysis of human reality. In order to avoid arbitrariness in choosing the adequate theoretical framework, we need to match them to the main regional trends. Although the first such theory to be introduced in the next chapter, namely, the theory of secularization, does not in its original proposition address the specific regional features as its main component, its developed version is very much suited for our purposes. However, in order to understand the implications of secularization theory's further development, I think it is essential to introduce its inception, not to mention the fact, that without it any survey within the field of religious studies would be incomprehensible as it is one of its basic and most significant theoretical cornerstones. All in all, by the end of the introductory chapter we have come to see region as a constructed cultural reality. The following chapter will demonstrate that religion too is a constructed reality. As many theories, so many religions<sup>17</sup>, or in other words, our perception of the region's religious dimension will depend on the theories we apply in our analysis of the region.

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<sup>17</sup> I have elaborated the notion of religion in itself (sui generis) and its criticism in a previous work (Máté-Tóth 2013, 82ff).

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