

## The concept of Central Europe in the post-war Soviet academic discourse

### Közép-Európa fogalma a háború utáni szovjet tudományos diskurzusban

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*Absztrakt.*

*A cikk a „Közép Európa” meghatározás alkalmazási körét és fokozatát tárja fel a háború utáni szovjet tudományos értekezés szaknyelvi és fogalmi fejlődésében. Jóllehet nemzetközi vita folyik, amely lényegében megvizsgálja a fogalmat, annak használatának tanulmányozása különböző tudományos nyelveken segíthet a vita gyakorlat-orientáltabbá tételében. Jelen munka a korszak hiteles forrásainak áttekintésén alapul, mint például az enciklopédiák és az akadémiai szótárak, valamint neves szovjet tudósok publikációi azokban a tudományágokban, ahol a fogalom alkalmazása megtalálható (földrajz, történelem stb.). A külföldi kiadványok hatása és a „Közép - Európát” sematikus mentális szókapcsolatként alkalmazó tendencia a különböző jelenségek szempontjából kulcsfontosságú a szakszó fejlődésében. A cikk hozzájárul a régió lehatárolására irányuló kísérletekhez, a közös megértés bizonyításával és a körülötte, valamint a szovjet és a posztsovjet távlatok közötti folytonosság vizsgálatával.*

*Kulcsszavak: geokonceptió, regionalizáció, szakszókincs*

*Abstract.*

*The article explores the scope of use and the level of terminological and conceptual maturity of “Central Europe” in the post-war Soviet academic discourse. While there is a current in the international debate examining the notion in substance, an investigation of its usage in distinct academic languages can help to render the discussion more practice-oriented. The present work is based on a review of authoritative sources of the period, such as encyclopaediae and academic dictionaries as well as publications of prominent Soviet scholars in the disciplines where the notion found its application (geography, history, etc.). The influence of foreign publications and the tendency to employ “Central Europe” as a schematic mental placement for distinct phenomena are found pivotal for the term development. The article contributes to the attempts of delimiting the region, through evincing shared understandings of and around it, and looking into the continuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet perspectives.*

*Keywords: geoconcept, regionalization, terminology*

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## Introduction

Present-day uses of the notion of Central Europe in scholarly works and beyond, across nations and languages, are to a great extent embedded in the region bonding projects of the past century and a half, in which, as studies show, a whole transatlantic constellation of authors has been instrumental (*Koudela, 2017; Hnízdo, 2021*). The attachment to the dominant conceptualisation of that protean European space construed, for instance, through the works of Naumann (*1915*) and Halecki (*1943*), completely overshadows alternative perspectives (especially, from other regions of the world) on “Central Europe” and contributes to its further confinement to the role of a term denoting a specific historico-ideological phenomenon. Faced with that tendency, one might be prone to investigate the sources of proper geographic tool potential of the notion in question.

The Soviet school of thought refrained from participating in the political exercise of fashioning the concept of Central Europe. The external and internal country conjuncture led it instead to concentrate on the Pan-Slavist Studies (see for example, *Volkov, 1969*) perspective (*Miller, 2001*). After the late 1920s and early 1930s, turbulent for the Soviet Slavic Studies, that approach was gradually re-adopted – not exempt of a burden of ideological suspicion – between 1934 and the mid-1950s (*Romanenko, 2009*). Nevertheless, the notion of Central Europe as such existed in the scholarly narrative practice. Against the backdrop of the Soviet academic rigour, the notion stood out as the one that retained much of the vagueness of a barely established term, regardless of having been in circulation for several decades.

This is then illustrative of the line of intellectual inheritance that in the post-Soviet times publications in Russian explored various elements of the “Central European debate” and the multiple ways of such regional framing underlied by peculiarities of borrowed notion translations and interpretations: “Central Europe” (Центральная Европа as in *Miller, 2001; Kosov, 2009*), “Middle [In-Between] Europe” (Средняя Европа, see *Stykalin et al., 2009*), “Middle Europe” (Срединная Европа, see *Gadzhiev, 2000; Baranov, 2009*), – as well as offered extensive general discussion of the appropriate terminology (*Kobrinskaya, 1997*).

This article is bound to explore the presence of “Central Europe” in the post-war Soviet academic discourse (in Russian), the scope of its use, and its level of terminological and conceptual maturity. In this regard, the works which are not specifically dedicated to the discussion of the concept are of particular interest. Their scientific focus being elsewhere, they conveyed a relatively depoliticized, but nonetheless formal, scholarly view of what can be termed Central Europe. They developed it as a notion in distinct academic languages, building shared understandings of and around it, and eventually had an influence on its life in the wider vernacular. Their present review, thus, contributes to the attempts of locating the region and looking into the continuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet perspectives.

## Geographical Imagination and the Concept

With more countries set on the “socialist path of development” in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviet science received an opportunity to undertake more profound studies on the new “friendly countries” in Europe, also in collaboration with local academiae. It was, besides, driven by the necessity to consolidate operationalisable knowledge about the Socialist countries to facilitate the governance and integration of the Bloc. As a primary task, this meant defining and conceptualizing the heterogeneous group as a single region which would enable coherent knowledge production. For this goal, as noticed by *Miller (2001)*, wider umbrella terms, unifying and imprecise at the same time, were

preferred: such were “Central and South-Eastern Europe” (CSEE) or, less frequently, “Central and Eastern Europe” (CEE) (the spectrum of terms included several other contextual synonyms tailored to the political geographic area). The consequent re-institutionalising of research, virtually a Mannheimian case in point, to a large extent determined the space for the usage of the notion of “Central Europe”.

Free of extensive ideological pressure, it was yet less than impotent in constructing geographic images and can thus be read through the lens of the theories of representation (*Doise, 1985*), cultural linguistic concept (*Vorkachev, 2001; 2014*), and *dispositif* (*Baudry, 1975*). The mental pictures (sporadically, though, supported by cartography) created by different uses of the phrase mediated interpretation of the reality and knowledge development. Moreover, they served as a gateway to shared semantic fields of the Soviet academic language and informed popular geographical culture (*Maksakovskiy, 1998*).

The latter refers to spatial scholarly imagination at large, but – by way of connotation – is also seen as opposed to ignorance. The precondition for its existence is, however, sufficient maturity of the respective concept. A concept can be used as a constitutive principle (*Ibidem, p.66*), a unit of collective knowledge (*Vorkachev, 2001*), and, therefore, a component of the (linguistic) picture of the world (*Belousov, Zelyanskaya, 2013*). Hence, this “ponderous” element is a link between imaginary and discourse. With regard to a regionalizing notion, functionalist paradigmatic outlook is deemed fruitful, for it presents the discourse in which a notion is found as a social interaction and focuses on its outcomes. The notion (or concept) is then a part of its formative capability (*Foucault, 1972, p. 45*): it organizes cognition, builds mental spaces (*Fauconnier, 2004*), makes one see the reality through a certain device (*Baudry, 1975*), according to the cognitive analytical approach.

In the Soviet academic tradition, from its early days, geographic representations were employed creatively for explaining and naturalising “basic ideological content”, while knowledge acquisition formats had to be at the same time scale-wise adequate to the contemporary Soviet projects (*Orlova, 2009*). So as to follow the development of the notion of “Central Europe”, the paper draws on a number of recognised authoritative sources, while it is assumed that concepts acquire their content within cultural contexts (*Vorkachev, 2001*).

## **Methodology**

So as to follow the development of the notion of Central Europe, the paper relies on a review of a substantial number of recognised authoritative sources employing keyword search (“Central Europe/an”, “Middle Europe/an”, “CE”). This means a thorough survey of such crucial publications as Soviet encyclopaediae and thematic academic dictionaries considered up-to-date in the 1940-80s. It includes as well a manual analysis of the respective terms’ uses in published works of prominent Soviet scholars of the time (listed in library catalogues) coming from a broad range of disciplines where the notion in question found its application: geography, history, area studies, geology, archaeology.

## **“Central Europe”: Term Usage and Development**

Unsurprisingly, “Central Europe” (the same as “Middle Europe”) does not appear as a defined notion in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (GSE; *Vvedenskiy et al., 1952*), nor in the *Short Geographical Encyclopedia* (SGE; *Grigoriev et al., 1961*), the *Soviet Historical Encyclopedia* (*Zhukov et al., 1964*), *Geographical Dictionary* (*Agapov, 1968*), and *Dictionary of Meaning and Origin of Geographical Terms and Names* (*Mikulich, 1961*). What is interesting is the situation, atypical for the Soviet academia, whereby a (predominantly) geographical term is widely used without being defined: in all the mentioned sources the phrase (with capitalized C and E) can be encountered within specific

articles. The *Dictionary of Geographic Names* (Komkov et al., 1986) placed Austria, Poland, Hungary, both Germanies, and Czechoslovakia in Central Europe. The *Soviet Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (Prokhorov et al., 1982) purported the same view. The *Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (Ogarkov et al., 1983) defined Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia as states in Central Europe; it contained as well an article on the Central European Theatre of Operations of NATO, bordering with the westmost Socialist states. Moreover, it described the battle of Olomouc (Czechia) as the first defeat of the Tatar-Mongols in Western Europe.

The overall role of translation in the development of this initially borrowed notion (the original terms in German and English, regional authors' elaborations) remained significant. The discourse was infused with translations of foreign authors and with interpretations and discussions of sources in the original language. The academic interest in the Western political and geopolitical thought, concomitant with the official unacceptance of geopolitics as a discipline (Modzhorian, 1974), resulted, for instance, in publications dealing with the roots of what gradually became the Central European frame of thought (Yerusalimskiy, 1964; Sadovaya, 1990; an example of criticizing Kretschmer's *Historische Geographie von Mitteleuropa* in Yatsunskiy, 1955; France and Central Europe in Tarle, 1961), including works specifically dedicated to its basilar concept of "Middle Europe" (the idea in the context of sketching the Pan-Germanism of the Middle European Customs Union in Gural'skiy, 1945).

Additionally, specific geographic names connected the imaginary around "Middle Europe" to spots on geographical maps: Среднеевропейская гряда (the Middle European Ridge), Среднеевропейская равнина (the North European Plain), Среднеевропейская впадина (the Central European Depression), Среднеевропейское море (the Central European Sea).

The first, rather eclectic, edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* in the article on Europe (Shmidt et al., 1932) subdivided the "continental stamina of Europe" – based on physical geographic and climate attributes – into four "higher-order complexes": Western Europe, Central Europe, a transitional strip, and Eastern Europe (*Ibidem*, p. 213). This Central Europe, with an oceanic climate but a distinct winter, embraced Germany, the Netherlands, Eastern Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Northern Hungary. The Limitrophe States – from Finland to Romania – were comprised by the transitory strip. In the part on history, however, the Encyclopedia lumped together into Central Europe the "wrecks" of two empires: Austria, the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia (*Ibidem*, p. 309). Besides, it contained references to geomorphological processes in Central Europe (*Ibidem*, pp. 174-175) and to Middle Europe in the Triassic period (*Ibidem*, p. 177), while mapping the Middle-European and Middle-European Transitional (Scandinavian-German) physical geographic zones. Certain terms contributed to the dispersion of the regional term's meaning, such as the Middle European area of the Northern climate subzone that included Northern European countries. GSE also used "Middle Europe" in 1932 along with "Middle America" and "Middle Asia" (later, those would be adapted to "Central America" and "Central Asia" (Mikulich, 1961)).

Coincidentally with the intensification of Slavic Studies in the 1950s (Romanenko, 2009), the special Soviet Physical Geography tradition (Prokaev, 1983; Oldfield, Shaw, 2007) lived in the 1950-60s through a grand discussion (Prokaev, 1983) on zone delineation (районирование, nominal territorial partitioning of the Earth's surface) embedded in the belief in the possibility to objectively discern geographic zones. The second edition of GSE described the Central European botanic province as one of three in the zone of temperate broad-leaf forests, stretching from the shores of Rhine to the southern Baltics (Vvedenskiy et al., 1952, p. 398). But more importantly, the article placed Central Europe between the Adriatic and the Danube, the river crossing its southern part (*Ibidem*, p. 404) and the Padan valley bordering with the region (*Ibidem*, p. 402); it introduced "eastern areas of Central Europe" (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany) (*Ibidem*, p. 394); it also placed Germany alternatively in the central part of Western Europe (*Ibidem*, p. 420) and explained pooling together Central and

Eastern Europe, like Poland, Hungary, Romania, with the goal of gradual study and exploitation of their mineral resources (*Ibidem*, p. 390).

For the expertise on Central Europe, GSE of 1952 relied on the influential translation of de Martonne (*Marton*, 1938). In its Introduction the French geographer inquired into the real geographic content of the notion of Central Europe and pointed out its qualitative intermediary condition, described the space as an area of sharp contrasts in climate and relief and something that is neither Western nor Eastern Europe; referring to its conventional composition of Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Romania, de Maronne foresaw an instable political future for it (*Ibidem*, pp. 7-8).

Another discursive influx source sees a number of contributions by scholars from other Socialist countries where the study of Central Europe could be institutionalized (for example, Poland in *Lossowski*, 1966) and gained an especially significant ideational momentum in the 1970s and 1980s to subsequently enter Soviet publications too. Such authors would come with a neat idea of the region, though Gierowski (1970) might have exclaimed with false modesty: “How many doubts arise when it comes to defining the boundaries of what we call Central Europe!” (*translated by D.V.*) And for the 17<sup>th</sup> century he situated the region with the centers in Vienna and Warsaw in the space conveniently surrounded by the Baltics, the Eastern Alps, and the Balkans, so as to go further into a more detailed investigation of its limits. In addition, selected foreign article titles were listed in dedicated sections of periodicals, such as “Through the Pages of Foreign Journals” in the *Questions of History*, displaying how recurrent Central Europe-related titles were in the Socialist scholarship.

With the gradual “normalization” of the term and departure from the fraught German loanword, whereby “middle” won over “kernel”, in the period of the 1960-70s the notion of “Central Europe” in the language of academic publications on Socialist countries became habitual (*Miller*, 2001), to put it carefully. An example of translation curation gives an insight into the ideal of terminology of the time: the book by the Hungarian geographer György Enyedi entitled *Economic Geography of East Central Europe* (Kelet-Közép-Europa Gazdaságföldrajza) was published under the title of *Economic Geography of the Socialist Countries of Europe* (Экономическая география социалистических стран Европы; *En’edi*, 1982). In countertendency, the profusion of terminologically inconsistent texts coupled with the “proprietary” Soviet theoretical underdevelopment of the concept led to the blurring or the interchangeable use of “Mitteleuropa” and “Central Europe” in less politicized domains. A work on the flora of the Tertiary Period (*Dorofeev*, 1964) operated with “Central Europe”, “middle Europe”, and “Middle Europe”. To look at the term propagation channels, Ivanov (1967) conceived of medieval Czechia as a part of Western Europe, but referred to Central Europe when elaborating on a foreign source. In a volume on ancient history, “Middle Europe” (*Arutyunov, Arkhipova*, 1989, p.122) and “Middle and Eastern Europe” (*Ibidem*, p. 123) appeared along with “Central Europe” used in a quotation from an English-language publication (*Ibidem*, p. 9) as well as independently (*Ibidem*, p. 10). In an article on Corded Ware culture, located by GSE (*Vvedenskiy et al.*, 1952, p. 403) “in the middle Europe”, Bondar’ (1985) followed the reasoning of an article of 1916 and attributed Czechia, Hungary, the Rhine valley, and Switzerland to Western Europe. This therefore appears logical that a joint Soviet-German study in geology read “Middle Europe”, from the Saar region to the Sudetes (*Janshin et al.*, 1977).

The Hercynian (Variscan) orogeny was indeed one of the “fiducial markers” in terms of spatial mapping of Central (or Middle) Europe: the orogenic belt extends from Western Europe to Germany and then to the Bohemian Massif in Czechia. In his seminal book Dobrynin (1948, p. 8) categorically drew the only two possible halves of Europe, the western and the eastern one. In a rather horizontal key, going from Northern Europe to Southern Europe he found Middle Europe (*Ibidem*, p. 17). In that way, the Alps while being in the centre of Western Europe, “are situated in Middle Europe”, together with the Carpathians (*Ibidem*, p. 18). The academic resorted to the topos of Central Europe (*Ibidem*, p.

308) to delimit a region in Europe that excluded the territory of the Soviet Union and peninsulas (according to the morphologic and tectonic map of Central Europe in the book): the part on Middle Europe covered, among other zones, the Central European Hercynian area.

Following Dobrynin, Grigoriev and the editorial team (1961) of SGE customarily identified Eastern and Western Europe, placing Czechoslovakia in the “central part of Europe” and situating the German Democratic Republic (GDR, as well as Germany, the country containing two states), Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Poland in Central Europe. Romania was placed in the south-east of Central Europe, whereas Hungary was defined as a state on the both banks of the Middle Danube. Economic Geography chose “foreign Socialist countries of Europe” as the name for the respective region. In the book of Mayergoyz and Maksakovskiy (1974, p. 17) the “central part of foreign socialist Europe” hosted Hungary and Czechoslovakia, while Alisov and Valev (1984), without drawing a distinct division between “South Eastern and Central Europe” and Eastern Europe (*Ibidem*, p. 46), characterized GDR as a “Central European country” (*Ibidem*, p. 53) and put Hungary in Central Europe (*Ibidem*, p. 165). Dobrynin’s longitudinal outline was ingested by Historical Geography (*Samarkin*, 1976; *Sinskaya*, 1969).

The *Soviet Historical Encyclopedia* (*Zhukov et al.*, 1961; 1963; 1964; 1968; 1974) described eight natural regions of Europe, the central part of the continent being divided between three of them. In the article on Europe it placed Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary in Eastern Europe, while in the respective country articles it located Hungary and Austria in Central Europe. The major work of Sveshnikov (1983) was dedicated to the Globular Amphora culture in “Middle and Eastern Europe” which included Poland, Czechoslovakia, and both Germanies. The Central European area in terms of a specific numismatic study was understood by Soboleva (1969) as extending from Romania to Luxembourg. The *History of Europe* (*Golubtsova et al.*, 1988, p.10) explicitly set apart the Central European and the Slavic Balkanic regions and categorized the Polish, Czech and Hungarian kingdoms and Austria in the 16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries as Central European states. It described “bourgeois transformations” in CSEE (*Ibidem*, p. 22) and the detachment of that region’s countries from the capitalist system (*Ibidem*, p. 30), thus respecting the proper contemporary manner of referring to that country group. But being a volume on ancient history, it used the term “Central Europe” extensively as a physical geographic topos. The use of “Middle Europe” and “Middle European” was marginal and might be a feature of the author’s language choice of Valeriy Titov (*Ibidem*, p. 89). The book recounted of the Middle European Early (Unetice culture), Medium and Late Bronze Age scale as developed initially for the Upper Danube area and Czechia (*Ibidem*, p. 110). The book also read of the Paleolithic Acheulean culture in the “central part of Europe (GDR, CSSR)” (*Ibidem*, p. 52).

In his work Gladilin (1990) saw the Acheulean culture research field as “Central Europe” meaning both Germanies, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Greece. This is one of the two typical cases when the notion makes appearance to denote – in a semi-metonymic manner – an areal. “Central Europe” was thus regarded as relatively neutral, amorphous, and elastic. In that way a study of the “geosinclinal” area in Central Europe (*Sokolov et al.*, 1968) went even beyond a Eurasian scope in the reports published (“Central Europe” implicitly became the type of orogeny). In a publication on Al-Gharnati’s travel (*Bolshakov*, 1971) “Central Europe” “shifted” to cover Hungary and Eastern Europe.

In the other typical case the notion is used to pull together geographic dots. “Central Europe” proved to be only a few countries in the account of botanist Astrov (1976): Poland, GDR, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Proskuriakova et al. (1981) picked Central Europe for their geomorphologic research which had two sets of sites: Obninsk-Minsk-Warsaw-Prague and Pulkovo-Riga-Prague in the “central part of Europe”. Thus, unlike the formal and advised cliché of CSEE which had categorization as its primary effect, on multiple occasions “Central/Middle Europe” was used – at times heuristically and creatively – with a more pragmatic scholarly intent of placing a phenomenon schematically on the

mental map of the reader. Hence, from the “middle part of Europe” (*Vvedenskiy et al., 1952, p. 397*) and, for instance, mid-European cyclones (*Ibidem, p. 393*) it was easy to pass to “Middle Europe” (*Ibidem, p. 399*). This explanation through placing engendered also a stratum of secondary terms. A curious case of using “Central European” (*Lebedeva, Semina, 1974*) in relation to the forest steppe soils in the south-west of the USSR illustrates an instance of continuity in the local auto-perception as the centre of Europe, but might also project a “closed” vision of “European” as pertaining to the European part of the Soviet territory.

At the backdrop of the generally parsimonious and discipline-specific use of “Central Europe”, the terms CSEE and CEE were symptomatic of the return from the pragmatic to the symbolic Soviet geographic project that thrived on generalizations and conventional character of spatial images (*Orlova, 2009*). CSEE was a name for the locus of the countries of popular democracy (*Vvedenskiy et al., 1952, p. 417*), but since Yugoslavia was not included, the two terms were not synonymous. The latter group of countries at the same time comprised Albania and Bulgaria and therefore stood conceptually far from “Central” Europe. In the understanding of Klimpush (*1972*) the Socialist countries of Central Europe were Hungary, GDR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. The “bourgeois Central Europe” in Leybo’s (*1984*) work contained West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. By the end of the 1980s “CSEE”, along with “Central and Eastern Europe”, was commonly used (for instance, in *Dyakov et al., 1986; Pop et al., 1989*).

Romanenko (*2009*) praised the book series “Central and South-Eastern Europe in the epoch of the transition from feudalism to capitalism: Problems of history and culture” (including *Freydzon et al., 1981; Mylnikov et al., 1984*) as a unique complex integrative study of the region. With these and many other volumes, the Soviet Institute for Slavic Studies, though intentionally structurally compartmentalised from German Studies, paradoxically became the most consistent body for the research on the matters of Central Europe. Its “Central Europe” included, first of all, Czechoslovakia and Poland as states of Western Slavs (*Bromley, Markov, 1982*). The Institute was a place for debates about the terms: in his contribution on Hungary, Islamov (*Pisarev, et al.1974*) preferred “Middle Europe” and used “Central Europe” as a notion apart (ubication of Austria and Czechia, the setting for the revolution of 1848), not unlike CEE. In the same volume Dostal’ drew attention to the study of the national renaissances and interrelations of peoples of CSEE, and some specialised volumes (for example, *Freydzon et al., 1981*) would stick to the “Central” option.

A restriction, as clear as in the case of the names of foreign political concepts, could harness the term interpretation when it came from a non-academic domain, such as practical International Affairs with the Berlin crisis of 1961 or the negotiations on reductions in armed forces and conventional weapons in Central Europe. In relation to the latter, Basmanov (*1978, p. 43*) reflected on a stumble block in the discussion: the NATO countries had insisted on narrowing the circle of negotiating parties to those who possessed “troops or territories” in Central Europe, that is twelve states (Belgium, the UK, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the USA, both Germanies, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR).

## Conclusion

From the several streams that can be distinguished in the development of the notion of “Central Europe” in the post-war academic publications (scholars’ theorisations, translations, discussion of foreign research or of international documents) one can see that in the Soviet Union it failed to rise to the level of a single full-fledged concept, let alone of the so-called geo-concept (the lack of its stable image is quite noticeable). Although the notion was relatively widely used, it existed in the form of a (de facto) term, or rather multiple homonymous terms and micro-concepts. Primarily a physical geographical notion, a container space, in the absence of a cross-disciplinary discussion “Central

Europe” grew the scope of its meaning in separate fasciae; and thus, the pluralist paradigm ultimately yielded frequent cases of terminological incongruence, never permitting that region to become a conceived place. While Gasche (2008) presented the concept of Europe as surviving through its continuous reinvention, ironically, the peculiar vitality of “Central Europe” was nurtured, probably, in a similar way under the conditions of scarce ideological attention to and, consequently, a relatively “open” language around it.

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