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GEOPOLITICAL ESSENCE OF CENTRAL EUROPE IN WRITINGS OF EUGENIUSZ ROMER

Abstract: Eugeniusz Romer maintained that the notion of Central Europe, introduced at the end of the 19th century by German geographers was of a distinct geopolitical character. The thesis that Poland is situated in a transitional zone between the Western and the Eastern Europe denies Poland the right to an independent political existence. Romer's opinion was that the location of Poland is characterised by its bridge-like situation between the Baltic and the Black Seas. This location determines the geopolitical identity of Poland as well as its rights to independence. Romer's arguments, supported by cartographic, demographic and ethnographic research became the basis for the determination of the area and the borders of Poland at the peace conference in Paris (1919–1920).

Key words: geopolitics, transitional situation, bridge-like situation, territorial expansion, natural and political borders.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Eugeniusz Romer (1871–1954), one of the most outstanding Polish geographers of the 20th century. Studies and ideas in climatology, glaciology and cartography of the great Lvov geographer found their permanent place among the greatest achievements of cartographical thought in the world. Studies in geopolitics, ever-present in the output of the author of the “Geographico-statistical Atlas of Poland”, were also an important part of Romer's scientific work. Disputes about the place of the Polish lands in the geographical space of Europe were the starting point of these studies. Apart from their purely scientific value, Romer's studies had also political consequences because of their influence on decisions of military, social, and even economic nature (Jędrzejczyk 1997).

Disputes concerning the geographical and geopolitical situation of the Polish lands were a very important trend in Polish geography at the turn of the 20th century. The issue whether the Polish territory was of a transitional or a bridge-like nature was related, first of all, to the relationship between man and his geographical environment; more precisely, to the influence of the environment on the statehood of the multiethnic Polish Republic. It is therefore not surprising that all the disputes about the nature of the Polish lands referred to the basic law of geopolitics formulated by Ratzel (1889), according to whom the specific and inherent characteristic features of the environment determine all spatial and social arrangements and structures.

In Polish geography the main proponents of the notion of transitionality were W. Nałkowski (1887, 1912) and L. Sawicki (1910, 1916). According to them, it was exactly the characteristics of the geographical environment, which determined the lack of an objective basis for the existence and permanence of a sovereign state entity in this part of Europe. This is because from the geopolitical point of view, only great political powers could fight for the optimal "living space" on the European plain. And it was these powers, which determined the practical and social fates of the transitional zone called "Central Europe".

Viewed this way, the notion of Central Europe was distinctly geopolitical in character, since it defined not only the place of Poland in the physical space of Europe, but also in its social and political space. It also determined directions of the territorial expansion, relations with the neighbouring countries and cultural threats and tensions. Being part of Central Europe defined therefore the fate of the communities living there and of the political organisations.

Eugeniusz Romer was opposed in a decisive and firm manner to these ideas. His claims were based on penetrating geographical, historical, ethnological and also economic studies. In an article published in *Ziemia* (Earth) a few years before the World War II, E. Romer (1910) pointed out that famous geographers of the Renaissance (e. g., Botero, Cluverius) didn't know the notion of Central Europe. Nor did A. F. Büsching, the most famous statistician-geographer of the 18th century, know this notion. The term "Central Europe" (*Mittleuropa*) occurred for the first time in the collective work published in the 1820s by the J. G. F. Cannabich and his school, out of which came out later C. Ritter. In this work, however, only the formal value of this name and of its classification for the purposes of descriptive political geography was given.

This term, popularised later by the German geographical literature, was used to mean that the axis and heart of Europe is supposed to consist exactly of Central Europe. The essence of this notion, however, was supported neither by the physical characteristics of the continent nor by the characteristics of the life of European nations; it was never identified, either, with the notion of a geographical entity. Central Europe, as E. Romer wrote (1910, s. 242), "wandered aimlessly around Europe, changed within the political borders of Germany or else spread to the delta of the Danube". German interpreters defined the borders of Central Europe in such a way "as not to brush the domain which even today bears even a shadow of the politically accepted name of Poland. Thanks to that the notion of Poland as a separate political entity ceased to exist!". In other words, the term "Central Europe" was given a definite semantic meaning, far removed however from the strictly geographical essence.

In his work entitled significantly *Polska. Ziemia i państwo* (Poland. Land and State) E. Romer (1917) has shown that the notion of Central Europe was in its essence a political doctrine expressing the programme of the German territorial expansion. From this doctrine it followed clearly that everything

that is not contained within Central Europe belongs to the unified region of Eastern Europe. According to Romer, Central Europe consisted originally of Switzerland, Germany and Austria proper only. Soon, Holland and Belgium were added to this complex, and in 1887 A. Penck defined its eastern border as the watershed between the Odra and the Vistula rivers. As the alliance of Germany and the Habsburg monarchy grew closer, both states exerted an increasing political influence in the East. The notion of Central Europe expresses these interests in a drastic way. Already in 1903 J. Partsch, the actual author of this notion, included in it nothing less than Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, the whole Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. "The stretch of this territory from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, the exclusion of Denmark and the Kingdom of Poland – emphasised E. Romer (1917, pp. 31–32) – a veritable territorial bay in the area understood this way, shows all too well the political nature of this scientific construct". It was a construct, which in time became an important and dangerous tool not only in the hands of politicians, but also in those of ideologues and even philosophers.

Significantly, the issue of inviolability of the Russian borders disappeared from the writings of German geographers already in the early 20th century. In 1907 A. Hettner included in the notion of Central Europe also the Kingdom of Poland, justifying this by the creation of a new notion of transitional Europe, i.e., of the old Poland, one of whose parts is adjacent to Eastern Europe and another, to Central Europe. The final synthesis was created in 1912 by E. Banse, who questioned the eastern border of Europe on the Ural Mountains, accepted by the scientists of such calibre as I. Kant, C. Ritter or A. Humboldt. Banse excluded Russia entirely from Europe, creating the notion of a completely new part of the world, Great Siberia, directly adjacent to Central Europe. It, in turn, included in the east not only the Kingdom of Poland, but also the Baltic provinces of Russia. In view of these notions, Poland continued to appear as a "transitional land" between two worlds: West and East.

World War I, however, "tore into pieces" – as E. Romer (1918, p. 33) put it picturesquely – "the recent notions of Eurasia and of transitional Europe". Already in 1914 the German historian P.A. Merbach claimed that the region between the Elbe and the Vistula (and farther east), the cradle of the Germanic tribes, was Europe at its fullest, the territory of the German expansion and revindication. Thus the borders of Central Europe in this new meaning of this notion reached the Dnepr and the Dvina rivers! The notion of Central Europe, which resulted from the national chauvinism, became for the Germans a slogan of the political and military expansion. Soon it became one of the basic terms used in European geography, including French, English and – significantly – Polish geography.

Already in 1829 a serious military study, which our neighbours could not possibly approve of, was published in Warsaw. Its author, Wojciech Jastrzębowski, gave it a significant title *Carte climatologique de Varsovie comme*

point central de l'Europe. According to E. Romer (1910), already this title in itself justifies the properties of Central Europe much stronger than the vast German literature, which appropriated this notion to the German state. Soon, the notion of Central Europe found many advocates. In 1863 in Paris P. Dufour and A. Wrotnowski published a map of Poland entitled "Carte politique et routière de l'Europe Centrale, et principalement de pays situés entre la Baltique, l'Adriatique et la Mer Noire". A few decades later, when the issue of the independence of Poland appeared on the political arena of the world, maps of Polish lands with the name "Central Europe" were again published; their quality was highly praised by E. Romer. According to him, however, Central Europe didn't exist. E. Romer (1910, p. 242) expressed his creed as a Pole and a geographer in the following dramatic and lofty way: "Let's call our land by its proper name, because the name is the essence". This name "is, exactly, Poland", not some "Central Europe".

It is therefore not surprising that Eugeniusz Romer was against the use of a notion, which grew up from the German geopolitics. In the early 20th century the main advocate of the notion of Central Europe in German geography was E. Hanslik, for whom (Hanslik 1910, s. 130) "in Northern Europe, the internal physiographic border is a factor in changing political battles in space". For centuries it divided the Eastern European political life from the Western one, dividing Germany and Austria together with Hungary on the one side, and Poland and Russia on the other. In the ideas of this influential German geographer the Austro-Hungarian state is, however, located on a cultural border, i.e., on the German-Slavic language border. Its Eastern border follows partly the external physiographic line; Central Europe forms exactly the transitional zone; and the problem lies in the "cultural penetration of Western Europeans toward the East".

According to Hanslik (1910) the actual border between Western and Eastern Europe follows exactly the German-Slavic language border. It is namely the line of the strongest cultural decline, because "it divides regions with high material culture from regions with low material and spiritual culture". For that reason all frontier nations, except for the Czechs and Slovaks, belong culturally to Eastern Europe. The cultural contrast is expressed not only in the material and spiritual culture, but also in economy. The economic superiority of "western Europeans" is manifested not only in the size of farms or in the average income rate, but also in the planning of the settlements, the architecture of the houses, in farming tools and clothing.

Although Hanslik admits that cultural contrasts are more difficult to perceive than natural ones, nonetheless they too can be observed on the border of Eastern and Western Europe. Significantly, it is exactly on the territory of Poland that he seeks a confirmation of his hypotheses. Generally speaking, regions with a high percentage of illiterate people do not coincide with areas delimited by religious borders, but by linguistic ones. Polish Catholics do not belong, in his opinion, to the Western European spiritual area only because they are Catholics: the border of the higher spiritual level, not much different

from the material level, coincides here with the internal borderline between the Germans and the Slavs. It is this line that forms, approximately, the cultural border between Eastern and Western Europe; it is here that a great cultural gradient occurs; it is also along this line that for centuries the state border between Eastern and Western Europe extended. In the geopolitical sense, Hanslik distinguishes Eastern and Western Europe, divided by a transitional land, delimited by the Gdańsk–Trieste and Gdańsk–Odessa lines. In this scheme Poland is definitely a transitional region. Its relief has a distinctly Western European character. The ethnic border between the Germans and the Poles, running from Gdańsk to Trieste, is the place of the strongest cultural decline toward the East.

Eugeniusz Romer, also in *Ziemia*, presented a decided critique of E. Hanslik's ideas. For E. Romer (1910), the intensification of certain cultural characteristics along the Gdańsk–Cracow–Adriatic line, emphasised so strongly by Hanslik, is beyond doubt. This line does indeed reflect a significant decline of agriculture, of the development of mining and industry, of public administration – briefly, of almost all symptoms of welfare or material culture. But, as Romer emphasises, these contrasts of material culture are not accompanied by analogous symptoms of spiritual culture. The degree of illiteracy can't be regarded as a measure of spiritual culture, because, as Romer (1910, s. 242) writes, "can such superficial and imposed from above training give any idea about the spiritual tension of a society". Romer was convinced that only "the strength and the direction of the social sentiments are the most obvious, if not the only one, measure of the spiritual culture".

By formulating the issue in this manner, E. Romer (1910, p. 242) sees on the one side of Hanslik's line a society whose "national sentiments, patriotism are materialised in the highest degree" and on the other side a society which "was guided by altruistic sentiments to such a degree that in political and social cataclysms which it underwent it undermined the foundations of its own material culture and caused the decline of its own welfare". In other words, Romer saw the difference in the levels of the material and spiritual cultures between Poland and Western Europe only in the history of the state and nation and not in the physiographic and antropogeographical characteristics. The decline of the material culture, so pronounced along Hanslik's line, is, after all, a creation of the last decades, formed against the background of political relations on which the Polish society had no influence. With this enigmatic (because of censorship) statement Romer meant of course the politics of the states invading and partitioning Poland with respect to Poland and the Poles.

Romer's opinion was that the decline of the material culture couldn't be identified with an ethnographic border. As an evidence of this he gave the situation of the Polish lands under Prussian rule, where due to the repressive politics of the Prussian administration much of the Polish spiritual culture disappeared, but at the same time this disappearance was accompanied by an unusual development of the material culture. The welfare of the Polish

society under the Prussian rule was no different from that of the German society, as long as natural factors (such as mineral resources or soils) are not taken into account. Corn crops were even higher than the average for the whole Prussian state. This welfare was exclusively the work of the Polish society achieved in the situation of an unequal cultural and economic battle.

Yet it was exactly the physiographic conditions that were, in Romer's opinion, the most important fact destroying the politically tinged hypothesis of E. Hanslik. The claim of the German geographer that the organic world and the climate of Poland are Eastern European in character is completely unfounded. "Has" – asks somewhat rhetorically E. Romer (1910, p. 243) – "the land which along the Królewiec–Chełm line crosses the eastern border of beech and yew, whose eastern historical domains are surrounded by the border of beech, has this land an Eastern European physiognomy?" Furthermore, the border of the Eastern European climate lies at least 500–700 km east of the Gdańsk–Odessa line. In the west, especially along the axis of the European Plain, this border is very weakly delineated. The whole Poland has thus Western European climate. Hence, the geopolitical claims of Hanslik lack any geographical basis. Throughout its history and through its natural conditions Poland was and is one of the pillars of Western Europe. This thesis was formulated even more strongly by S. Lencewicz (1928, p. 19). Although he admitted that Poland is situated in the geometric centre of Europe, he also claimed that "from the geographical point of view, however, it can't be regarded as having a central position". Central Europe is only a geographico-political notion.

Romer's calling in question the geographical and geopolitical idea of Central Europe had also a political basis. According to the theory of F. Ratzel (1903) it was exactly this region of Europe that wasn't entitled to the creation of sovereign political entities; this followed from the character of the physiography of the European continent. It was a privilege of great powers only, either in Western or in Eastern Europe, while the nations from the transitional zone (that is, from *Mittleuropa*) had to coexist within the framework of a larger administrative structure. For Romer, from the geographical point of view, Poland belonged to Western Europe, and thus it had the same rights to an independent existence as a state as had other states in this region. His stance is therefore opposite to Ratzel's theory of political space, or, more precisely, to his theory of power status. For Ratzel (1903, cited after: E. Romer 1929, p. 2) the main principle governing the political space is the rise of world empires "which follows from the action of the geographical factor in the internal political system of a state".

It is known that in F. Ratzel's notion the phenomenon of the power status of a state is associated with modern times. This phenomenon was the result of new, large spaces, "given to the human thought to manage and to command". The creation of world powers happens not only as a result of annexing a certain part of a state, but also as a consequence of the "will to grow into the land and to grow accustomed to it". Natural conditions not only accelerate

this process, but also “force the realisation of political goals”; goals, which are, of course, realised by military means – and from that the geographical thesis of general importance follows. According to this thesis, the political basis for a state consists of its inhabitants, living from the given land, that is, from the space given to them (*Lebensraum*) and dependent on their “will to live”. Central Europe can therefore be the “living space” for world powers only; there is no room in it for small states. Ratzel calls it the process of historical integration through “peaceful occupation”.

For E. Romer (1929, p. 9), however, “numbers demonstrating the transformations of the political status on our globe do not support Ratzel’s opinion”. If in support of his claim Ratzel opposes thousands of states from the past to the fifty-four states from the late 19th century, he compares political systems of completely different form and contents. In the first quarter of the 20th century one can see the process of creation of new, autonomous territorial units. The number of states together with regions with a separate administration had grown since the mid-19th century from 84 to 153. In Romer’s opinion, the long-lasting existence of small and very small states is just as striking as the constant increase of the number of independent states. A detailed analysis of the geographical conditions of smaller states proves that they possess a “distinct geographical individualism”, which gives them an appropriate political importance. Such importance is characteristic also for Poland, which aspires to become a stable and strong state. As an independent state, Poland causes however a competition between the neighbouring powers, endeavouring at preventing the possession of the object of this importance by “undesirable opponents”. European powers should be thus, according to the geopolitical claims of Romer, underwriters of the independence of Poland only under the condition that they accept Poland’s aspiration to become a powerful state. In this way, the notion of Poland as a bridge-like state, stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea, gradually admitted – especially in mid-1930s – the character of a political and strategic programme in the face of threats looming on the European political scene.

In any case, Eugeniusz Romer did not accept the thesis that Poland lies in a transitional zone between Western and Eastern Europe, that is, in Central Europe, because such zone existed neither in the physical nor in the socio-economic space. This thesis had also a purely political meaning, because in essence, it refused Poland the right to an independent existence. It was, therefore, an obvious polemic with Ratzel’s geopolitics according to which only states of great demographic potential form the political space of Europe. Such states have also a civilisational mission among the weaker (in the cultural and political sense) neighbours, which should therefore be a part of their political organisms. As an example, Ratzel gave Germany and their mission in the East, whose original name became a symbol of aggression, intolerance and chauvinism.

The Lvov geographer showed in a convincing way, based on a rich factual material, that the so-called cultural gradient between Polish and German

lands – used by Ratzel and his followers as a weapon in this discussion – was a phenomenon changing in space and time. It wandered since the dawn of the European civilisation from the region of the Mediterranean to the West, including France, Germany and finally Poland. The notion of the cultural gradient can therefore be viewed as a process of spatial diffusion of innovation, and not only as an argument for the superiority of one community over another and the rights of the former to the political domination.

Romer's studies devoted to Central Europe, and hence to the essence of the position of Poland in Europe, are important not only for the Polish geography, but also for the Polish political and social thought. Thanks to their solid methodological and factual foundations, his studies became also an important component of the domestic and foreign policy of the II Republic of Poland; they were also an important component of the social and cultural consciousness. Nowadays, they encourage to reflecting on the meanders of geopolitics and geography, of politics and social history.¹

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English translation: Małgorzata Mikulska

¹ It is worth noting that in 1990, the University of Warsaw organised a conference devoted to the notion of Central Europe. Materials from this conference were published in "L'Europe Centrale. Réalité, mythe, enjeu aux XVIII^e–XX^e siècles", *Les cahiers de Varsovie*, 1991.