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Foreword

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Foreword

The long-term interlocking of many nations and cultures in the Habsburg monarchy – despite its heterogeneous ethnic identities and their differences in nature – fostered the development of homogeneous basic traits. From the present point of view, we might refer to them as the collective identity of Central Europe. Moritz Csáky, for example, talks about a "paradigm of Central Europe" that emerged from an entirety of several shared forms and beliefs in the Habsburg Empire and from a mutual memory disposing of a variety of cultural codes. Over the centuries, this paradigm had gained the features of a monolithic stability in spite of its inherent instability. Thus, it had also demonstrated the ambiguity and fluidity of identities in an area marked by a complex socio-cultural stratification.

However, can we really make out anything like a "paradigm of Central Europe" even today? Can we localize it? Are there indications and corresponding signs for the existence of a Central European identity, an identity comprising the collective consciousness of shared cultural roots in a common empire, without lapsing back into an unwarranted and irrational Habsburg nostalgia? Social and cultural change on its way to ethnicized nations can be better understood when we study it as the struggle of competing identity options. Therefore, the options that proved eventually successful should not be interpreted in a quasi-teleological way.

We live in a very complex world. It is talking in platitudes to say so. Nevertheless, it is true. Many people fear the future, many are distrustful of their leaders, and believe that their voices are never heard. Many seek only to satisfy their private work wants, to please their private interests. Let there be no illusions about the difficulty of forming a national community, much less a joint identity. It is tough, difficult, not easy. Unity in diversity, like anything worth having, requires effort. Effort to learn about and respect difference, to be compassionate with one another, to cherish our own identity and to accept unconditionally the same in all others.

My ancestors came from territories that can be found today in states named Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Austria. In that light, I do feel to be Central European in many respects, and this identity means a lot to me emotionally. Therefore, I did not hesitate a second, when I was asked to stand in for Michael Moser as the coordinator of the Austrian research group during his half-year sabbatical at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge, Mass.

Matters won't rest there. Let's hope that the results of our project "Austrian, Czech, and Slovak Slavonic Studies in Their Central European Context: The Past and the Present" can meet the expectations of our readers and sponsors.

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