Aliaksei Kazharski: Central Europe Thirty Years after the Fall of Communism. A Return to the Margin?

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Three years after the publication of his *Eurasian Integration and the Russian World. Regionalism as an Identitary Enterprise*, Aliaksei Kazharski (2019, 2022) has now published a book on the Central European Visegrad Four countries: Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. This order of publication is one of the book's greatest possible strong points; the author does not approach Central Europe from the West, but from the East. This could provide him with a different perspective than the usual comparison between the Western "norm" and the Central European "pathology". What is more, as stated in Milada Anna Vachudová enthusiastic endorsement of the book on its cover, the book explains the *"complexities of domestic political change and regional cooperation among the four Visegrad countries".* In other words, one might hope that in the book, the region will be understood through looking at various countries and not only via selected attributes of Hungary and Poland, as the latter approach has been very common in political analyses during the last decade.

Right at the start of the review, it ought to be said that this potential was realized only partially. The book stands somewhere in between. It is a well-written and condensed introduction to contemporary Central European political identities with many valuable insights, but it simultaneously causes the reader to wonder about many things. The most important of them consists in how hard it is to differentiate an analytical *reconstruction* of a stereotype from an uncritical *reproduction* of a stereotype.

The book is divided into seven relatively short and easy-to-read chapters (plus, of course, an introduction and a conclusion). Three of these chapters are devoted to the (re)construction of the region and the transformation of the concept of *Central Europe* from its previous shapes up to the region's reconstruction during and after the refugee crisis of 2015. All this is sketched out in a very schematic way, and the book thus resembles a collage rather than a systematic historical reconstruction. Three other chapters are devoted to country studies of Czechia and Slovakia (put together in the same chapter, but with a partial sensitivity to their differences), Poland, and Hungary, respectively. The last chapter focuses on the Covid-19 pandemics in the region.

On the one hand, the book is grounded in careful research and presents not only a clear thesis, but also many arguments and examples to back it up. Kazharski's focus on discourse makes him very sensitive to various

formulations of power relationships, as well as to instances of telling political rhetorics. He combines the influences of Laclau and Mouffe with selected approaches to IR theory, creating a good basis for approaching the symbolic dimension of the re-constitution of the region in conflict with the liberal European mainstream. He also combines a regional approach with a focus on selected countries, thus showing that *Central Europe* as a region is still mostly constructed in political debates and imaginaries developed on the national levels. Unlike Vachudová, I did not find an explanation of their interplay in the book, although this underlining of their mutual relationships (and differences) is an important achievement.

On the other hand, the book also raises some doubts. Because the author's own approach and analysis give importance to words and their meaning, one might start with having doubts about the book's subtitle: *"Return to the Margin."* I must ask about the *Return*: a *Return* from where? Has Central Europe, during the last more than thirty years, been somewhere else than in the margin, both politically and economically? Unfortunately, the book is *"chiefly preoccupied with identities and ideologies"* (p. 181), which means that the discussion of political- and socio-economic *realities* enter the author's analysis mostly at the moments when they entered the discourse. The author thus cannot fully and consistently understand the region's historical and real marginalization that co-produces the discursive struggles. Kazharski presents in relatively vivid detail the debate concerning "Poland A" and "Poland B", for example, since it was developed by the actors in their discourse (p. 106). Much less developed is his discussion of the debate about the role of oligarchs in Czech politics or the struggles over cheap labor and outflows of profits in the region.

Indeed, economic inequalities, even in those economic debates that the author covers and whose importance he accepts, are not the most important driver, according to him. Kazharski is much more convinced by the perspective that *"socio-economic cleavages take a back seat to the normative conflicts between the 'liberal-open' and 'conservative-protective' mindsets"* (p. 106). As if we could differentiate this cultural-normative side from the socio-economic side without falling into the "chicken or egg" problem. Although this piece provides me with no space for a more nuanced counter-argument that would go beyond binary distinctions, I must rhetorically ask: Are not "liberal-open" views defended mostly by those who profit from globalization, while the "conservative-protective" mindset is accidentally

produced by those who need to be protected from its consequences? Gagyi (2016) and Scheiring and Szombati (2020) among others, answer this question affirmatively.

This choice, of course, predetermines the author's analysis of the relationship between the core of the EU and Central Europe as based in discourse, not in any real economic subaltern position. Thus, the region does not become marginal until it deviates from its alleged transition to or place in the supposed Western European mainstream. The author understands that Central Europe's criticism of Western Europe is of an *"embedded nature"* (p. 62), which does not mean a split with the West. But he is not thoroughgoing enough to show that it is, in fact, part of the Western development.

Kazharski quotes Milan Kundera almost *ad nauseam*. Kundera's short essay on Central Europe (none of his other texts are mentioned in the book) is the most quoted text in the book, but the author apparently did not catch the main point of Kundera's ideas: the characteristics that were for a long time attributed to Central European nations are now common to *all* European nations. Any European nation can become extinct now, and this can cause existential anxiety for them. Thus we can read the essay by Kundera also as a call to understand a deeper unity in the problems of Central and Western Europe, a call that was not heard by the author.

May we really conclude that in the times of Trump, Johnson, and Meloni, one particular region moves to the margins merely as a result of adopting conservative nationalist positions? Kazharski contrasts the nationalist xenophobia of V4 leaders with *"German Chancellor Angela Merkel's universalist humanitarian approach"* (p. 45) and *"Merkel's universalist stance"* during the refugee crisis (p. 49). Even in this case, however, we might wonder how "universalist" and "humanitarian" Merkel's position really was if we consider her refugee deal with Erdogan, which allowed Germany to stop accepting further refugees in exchange for substantial payments to an authoritarian leader for keeping refugees within his own borders. But above all, Merkel is not a synecdoche for the West, where not only is the conservative nationalist right on the rise, but also more liberal politicians are more and more reluctant to side with "universalist" and "humanitarian" positions. The author describes a phenomenon that exists both in the West and in Central Europe to the effect that somewhere the

glass is half full and elsewhere it is half empty. In his view, what is marginal in the West becomes almost the essence of Central Europe as a region. Sometimes it is even hard to tell when the author is describing the region (divided between "nationalists" and "liberals", as are other regions) and when he is depicting conservative discourses in the region. Kazharski even partially acknowledges this on the last pages of his work as a *"potential shortcoming of the book"*: he states that he *"focuses more on Eurosceptic discursive practice and the related geopolitical imaginaries, and perhaps does not pay enough attention to the opposing counter-discourses"* (p. 183).

This is all true, but the problem lies even deeper. By telling the story of the national conservative *part* of the V4 as *the story* of whole V4 the author reifies the face that was dominant in only some parts of the region at the moment when he wrote his book. After the Polish parliamentary elections in 2023, however, we might wonder if this book is as timely as it was before.

The author's focus on the conservative nationalist side of V4 discourses has its limits and shortcomings. What he presents as discourse analysis is often based on too limited and too biased a sample (choosing the word "core" [in the sense of the "core" of the EU] as the basis of the sample in his research, of course, will bring about the expected results). In consequence, the last chapter on the Covid-19 pandemics in the region does not tell us the fascinating story of the divisions in the conservative discourse, which range from the use of the pandemic to mobilize the national conservative agenda by Viktor Orbán to the almost libertarian pandemic denialism of Václav Klaus. Instead, it mostly focuses on what was common to all these discourses and what we could expect based on previous chapters: Central Europe's othering of Western Europe. Although it might be very fruitful, the analysis again mostly confirms what was written already in the previous chapters.

To sum up, Kazharski's book does not fulfill its potential or possible promise of bringing in the comparative perspective from the East, which could have been a comparative advantage in relation to other works and the academic mainstream. Only in a few places does he do things like, for example, anecdotally compare the *"Russian concept of sovereignty"* with Orbán's (p. 157), which is something that could be the basis of an interesting

comparison. Nevertheless, the author prefers the Western European supposed liberal normalcy as the basis for comparison.

What I consider to be probably the major negative aspect of the book, considering the culturalist point of departure of the author, is the absence of its historical sense. There are two problems. The first is that the book contains some relatively bizarre lapses like the *"Kosciuszko uprising in 1830–1831"* (p. 112), or the thesis that *"at the end of the interbellum period, only the Czechoslovak (read Czech) democratic institutions had been able to withstand the temptation of authoritarianism"* (p. 74–75), as if the authoritarian Czechoslovak "Second Republic" after Munich did not exist.[1] The second problem is more serious. Kazharski does not seem to have a very deep knowledge of the intellectual and historical sources of the various cultural and historical building blocks of the discourses which he mentions. He then works with aspects of the discourses that he analyses in a relatively decontextualized way. This starts with the first chapter and the declared non-systematic approach combining elements of various historical depictions of Central Europe. Elements of these discourses are combined in a relatively loose way, without sensitivity to various layers of temporality where they originate and spread. Thus they often also miss the necessary context. This is visible even more in the chapters on individual countries. Here, the author reconstructs important moments from the history of the countries and important stereotypes which are used in their evocations. However, without sensitivity to the contexts in which those stereotypes were created and how and by whom they are used, he often depicts them in a cartoon-like stereotypical way.

The book provides many valuable insights and summaries of both regional debates and country cases. Without a deeper contextual knowledge, however, it often schematizes. In the end, it can be read not only as a valuable scholarly contribution to the debate, but also as a document of its time: a time when (at least for many influential analysts) conservative nationalism could look like something that may be localized on the European "margins" and considered a re-creation of regionalized pathologies of Central Europe, while the western part may be characterized by a "universalist", "liberal" and "humanitarian" stance. Maybe the world would be a much nicer place in which to live if we could accept the author's view – both for the time which is depicted in the book, and for the time we live in now. Unfortunately, we live in a very different world and

Western Europe can be recognized much more according to its privileged position than according to its alleged committed defense of universalism.

ENDNOTES

1 Another bizarre lapsus is "the 2004 invasion of Iraq" (p. 5). Do these prestigious British publishing houses not have any editors?

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