1998

19 November. President Bill Clinton is impeached for lying under oath.
16–20 December. The USA and Britain bomb military installations in Iraq. The USA proclaims removal of Saddam Hussein to be a policy objective.
December. Major ceasefire violations in Kosovo by both Serb forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army.

1999

1 January. Monetary union comes into force between eleven member states of the EU. Only Britain, Sweden, Denmark and Greece do not participate.
4 January. The Euro makes a strong start on its first day of trading.
14 January. The European Parliament votes on a resolution to sack the whole European Commission, because of corruption in two commissioners' areas of responsibility.
15 January. Serb forces massacre forty-five Kosovar Albanian civilians in the village of Raçak.
29 January. The Contact Group on former Yugoslavia issues ultimatum to the Serbian regime and Kosovar Albanian rebels. If they have not agreed an interim political framework in three weeks, Nato will take military action against both sides.
6 February. Negotiations jointly chaired by the French and British foreign ministers begin in Rambouillet between Kosovar Albanian and Serbian government delegations.
17 February. Kurds protest across Europe after the arrest of Addullah Ocalan by Turkish special forces.
23 February. The Rambouillet talks end inconclusively with provisional agreement by the Kosovar Albanian delegation to an autonomy deal. Tony Blair announces plans for the 'changeover' from pound to euro.

Where is Central Europe Now?

'I'm delighted', said Henry Kissinger, 'to be here in Eastern, I mean *Central* Europe.' And for the rest of his talk he kept saying, 'Eastern, I mean Central Europe'. The place was Warsaw; the time, summer 1990; and this was the moment I knew Central Europe had triumphed.

For nearly forty years after 1945, the term was almost entirely absent from the political parlance of Europe. Hitler had poisoned it; the Cold War division into East and West obliterated it. In the 1980s, it was revived by Czech, Hungarian and Polish writers such as Milan Kundera, György Konrád and Czesław Miłosz, as an intellectual and political alternative to the Soviet-dominated 'Eastern Europe'. At that time, I wrote a sympathetic but also sceptical essay entitled 'Does Central Europe Exist?'[1]

In the 1990s, Central Europe has become part of the regular political language. To mark the shift, both the US State Department and the British Foreign Office have Central European departments. Although people still privately tend to say 'Eastern Europe', every greenhorn diplomat knows that one should refer to the whole post-communist area as 'Central and Eastern Europe' – a phrase so cumbersome it is often reduced to an abbreviation: CEE in English, MOE (*Mittel- und Osteuropa*) in German. Even Queen Elizabeth II has spoken of 'Central Europe', in the Queen's Speech to Parliament. So that's official. If the Queen and Henry Kissinger say it exists, it exists.

Just one problem remains: where is it? 'Central Europe', wrote the US secretary of state Madeleine Albright in a newspaper article in 1998, 'has more than 20 countries and 200 million people.'[2] Yet we often find the term used to mean just the countries who are joining Nato this spring – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic – or the

'first wave' of post-communist states negotiating to join the EU – the same three, plus Estonia and Slovenia.

Such disagreement is nothing new. In an article published in 1954, the geographer Karl Sinnhuber examined sixteen definitions of Central Europe. The only part of Europe that none of them included was the Iberian peninsula. The only areas they all had in common were Austria, Bohemia and Moravia.[3] Tell me your Central Europe and I will tell you who you are.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the debate about who did or did not belong to Central Europe had real political significance. So it has today. For to be 'Central European' in contemporary political usage means to be civilized, democratic, cooperative – and therefore to have a better chance of joining Nato and the EU. In fact, the argument threatens to become circular: Nato and the EU welcome 'Central Europeans', so 'Central Europeans' are those whom Nato and the EU welcome.

The rival definitions are based on arguments from geography, history, culture, religion, economics and politics. There are also major differences between how countries see themselves and how others see them. Since countries are not single people, and there are many 'others', one has to generalize dangerously from a whole kaleidoscope of national and individual views. I am mainly concerned here with the way the concept is deployed in what we still often call 'the West' – meaning primarily policy-makers and opinion-formers in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and other members of Nato and the EU.

Since Central Europe is, by definition, somewhere in the centre, every one of its boundaries is disputed: northern, western, southern and eastern. By the same token, in delineating Central Europe we also delineate the other major geopolitical regions of Europe today.

I

Interestingly, and encouragingly, the boundary that was most hotly disputed at the beginning of the twentieth century is largely uncontroversial at its end: the western one. The idea of 'Central Europe'

exploded during the First World War as a furious argument between those, like the German liberal imperialist Friedrich Naumann, who envisaged a German- and Austrian-ruled *Mitteleuropa*, and those, like Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the future president of Czechoslovakia, who were fighting for a Central Europe of small states liberated from German, Austrian and Russian imperial domination. This argument between visions of *Mitteleuropa*, on the one side, and of *Střední Evropa* or *Europa Środkowa*, on the other, continued throughout the 'Second Thirty Years War' from 1914 to 1945. It culminated in the Austrian-German Adolf Hitler's attempt to impose his own grotesque version of *Mitteleuropa* on Germany's eastern neighbours.

So, when the term was revived in the 1980s, there was understandable nervousness both among Germany's neighbours and in Germany itself. Many German writers preferred to use the less historically loaded term *Zentraleuropa*. But recent years have been reassuring. After some discussion, the Masaryk of the 1990s, Václav Havel, invited President von Weizsäcker of Germany to attend regular meetings of 'Central European presidents', and the German president has done so ever since. Most German policy-makers now accept that the reunited country is both firmly in Western Europe and in Central Europe again. As Havel once put it to me, Germany is in Central Europe 'with one leg'.

Of course, there have been tensions between Germany and its eastern neighbours – especially between Germany and the Czech Republic. And there will be more as the enlargement of the European Union slowly approaches, with Germans fearing that Poles and Czechs will take their jobs, and Poles and Czechs fearing the Germans will buy up their land. (The latter fears are especially pronounced in the formerly German western parts of Poland and in what used to be the Sudetenland, in the Czech Republic.) Yet no one could now argue that there is any fundamental political difference between what a mainstream German politician means by *Mitteleuropa* and what a Czech leader means by *Střední Evropa* or a Pole by *Europa Środkowa*. Increasingly, they are just different words for the same thing. This is a tribute to wisdom on both sides, and one of the bright spots on the map of Europe at century's end.

Meanwhile, the Austrians quietly pursue their own dream of Central

Europe, by which they mean nothing more nor less than the area of the former Austro-Hungarian empire. Symbolically, Austria celebrated its first presidency of the European Union with a 'Festival of Central European Culture'. More practically, flying Austrian Airlines is now the best way to get around the former Austro-Hungarian empire, and a new Central European Air Traffic Control centre will be located in Vienna. At the same time, Austrians are even more hostile than Germans are to the idea of people from their former empire actually coming to live in their country and competing for their jobs.

For completeness, one should add the eastern parts of Italy that have very special ties with Slovenia, Croatia and Austria – special ties consisting partly in the fact that Italy contains a small, still largely German-speaking piece of what used to be Austria (the South Tirol or Alto Adige), while Slovenia and Croatia have a little bit of what used to be Italy (eastern Friuli, the area around Trieste and the Istrian peninsula). Some would also include Liechtenstein and German-speaking Switzerland, although the Swiss generally hold themselves above this kind of thing. In all these cases, the historical legacy is still being played out in a hundred intricate ties and tensions. As I write, I have before me a purely hedonistic *Guida alla Mitteleuropa*, published in Florence in 1992, which maps an Italian '*Mitteleuropa*' from Milan via St Moritz, Vaduz and Bayreuth to Prague, then back through Vienna, Budapest and Zagreb to Trieste, Venice and Verona.

I find it useful to distinguish between West Central Europe – meaning mainly Germany, but also Austria and that corner of Italy – and East Central Europe. But when people say 'Central Europe' in English, they usually mean just the latter. As Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic become Western-style capitalist democracies, join Nato and (eventually) enter the EU, so the line between Central and Western Europe becomes increasingly blurred. Far from being dismayed, those who revived the terms in the 1980s should be delighted by this merging.

The frontier that need trouble us least is the northern one. In his anxiety to gather all the same nations under the flag, Masaryk included in his Central Europe everyone from Laplanders in the north to Greeks in the south. The region stretched, he implausibly suggested, from 'the North Cape to Cape Matapan'. But Scandinavia has a quite distinct

identity. To be sure, the Baltic states are an important borderline case. Lithuanians, in particular, will tell you their country belongs both to the Nordic or Baltic area and to Central Europe. Lithuania, they argue, is a bridge between the two. Since, however, Scandinavia is part of the Western capitalist democratic world, and the Baltic states are small, their in-between position is not in itself a political problem, although Russia's objections to their membership of Nato and the status of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad will be.

The major political argument now is about the eastern and southern edges. As revived by Kundera and others, the idea of Central Europe was directed against the East (with a large E), and specifically against Russia. Central Europe, Kundera suggested, was the 'kidnapped West'.[4] Until 1945, it had participated fully in all the great cultural movements of the West, from western Christianity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to Expressionism and Cubism. But politically it was now imprisoned in the East. Out of a cultural canon he made a cannon – firing against the East. As Joseph Brodsky pointed out, this was quite unfair to Russian culture. But politically it was justified and effective as an antidote to the even more misleading notion of a single 'Eastern Europe'.

In the 1990s, the cultural ca(n)non has been directed against the south more than the east. The new democracies of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia set out early in the decade to pursue Central European cooperation, symbolized by the 'Visegrád group' established in February 1991. They did this partly because they believed in the idea, which Havel and the new Hungarian president Árpád Göncz had preached in the 1980s, and wished to preclude any return to the petty nationalisms of the inter-war years. But it was also because this right, tight little regional cooperation would win their countries favour in the West. Which it did.

They had little trouble distinguishing themselves from the new eastern (with a small e) Europe: Belarus, Ukraine and European Russia. More difficult was the south. Romania tried to join the group at an early stage. The door was firmly closed in its face. A good reason for this was that Romania was at that time an undemocratic mess. A less good reason was that Polish, Hungarian and (then still) Czechoslovak leaders thought they had a better chance of entering or (as the Central

European ideology prescribes) 'rejoining' the West in a smaller, more homogeneous group. Which they did.

Then came the bloody collapse of the former Yugoslavia. This revived another previously dormant geopolitical nation, 'the Balkans', with connotations as negative as those of 'Central Europe' were now positive. For politicians everywhere, and especially for Polish, Hungarian and Czech politicians, the Manichaean contrast between 'Central Europe', bathed in light, and 'the Balkans', drenched in blood, was irresistible.[5]

To cap it all, the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington made his influential argument that the new cleavages of world politics would be based on 'the clash of civilizations' – civilizations being defined mainly by their religious origins.[6] The Kunderaesque view of Central Europe, arguing as it does from culture to politics, fits perfectly into the Huntingtonian scheme, and it's no surprise to find Huntington enthusiastically adopting the term. But he goes further, suggesting that the eastern and southern boundary of Central Europe is simultaneously the frontier of Europe and 'Western civilization'.

What is this boundary, more fundamental even than the post-1945 Iron Curtain? According to Huntington, it is the dividing line between western (Catholic or Protestant) Christianity, on the one side, and eastern (Orthodox) Christianity or Islam on the other. This line has been in roughly its present position for about 500 years, and its origins go back as far as the division of the Roman empire in the fourth century. Huntington even suggests that, because they are on the wrong side of the line, Turkey and Greece may not remain full members of Nato and, in the case of Greece, the EU. Note, however, that the Baltic states, most of western Ukraine, half of Romania, all of Croatia and even small parts of Bosnia and Serbia (i.e. the formerly Hungarian province of Vojvodina) fall on the 'western' side.

At worst, the result has been an extreme cultural determinism. I call it Vulgar Huntingtonism, by analogy with Vulgar Marxism. It says: If your heritage is western Christianity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the German or Austro-Hungarian empires, Baroque architecture and coffee with *Schlagobers*, then you are destined for democracy. But eastern (Orthodox) Christianity or Islam, the Russian

or Ottoman empires, minarets, *burek* and Turkish coffee? Doomed to dictatorship! Of course this is crude to the point of parody. But the way political ideas get used in real politics is very crude. And it has not been in the interest of the 'Central Europeans' to restore any confusing nuances.

Yet this extreme cultural determinism curiously coexists with an equally extreme political voluntarism. For, in the political usage of the West, countries seem to jump in and out of 'Central Europe' according to their current political behaviour. The best example of this is Slovakia, and it's worth dwelling on for a moment.

2

In 1990, few people doubted that Slovakia belonged to Central Europe. It joined the Visegrád group as part of Czechoslovakia; and being in the same state as the Czech lands was certainly a help. Yet Slovakia had many of the historical qualifications in its own right, being geographically central, overwhelmingly Catholic, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and with a capital that was once – though as Pressburg or Pozsony rather than as Bratislava – a cosmopolitan Central European city.

At the same time, its politicians were looking for more autonomy from Prague and a better deal in the Czecho-Slovak federation. These nationalist demands escalated under the demagogic populist Vladimír Mečiar, until the new Czech prime minister Václav Klaus suddenly gave more than most Slovaks (and probably Mečiar himself) wanted: full independence as a sovereign state, from 1 January 1993. A headline in a Czech newspaper encapsulated the Klaus view. It said, 'Alone to Europe or with Slovakia to the Balkans?'

For nearly six years thereafter, with one six-month intermission, Mečiar ran a corrupt, nationalist, semi-authoritarian regime of the kind that has been called, adapting a Latin American term, *demokratura*. It had more in common with the Tudjman regime in Croatia or even the Milošević regime in Serbia than it did with politics in the Czech Republic. The two parts of the former country – Masaryk's

country – grew apart at extraordinary speed. ('Yes, we occasionally look at Czech television,' a Slovak friend told me. 'We watch it as we used to watch Austrian television in the communist times.')

The three pillars of Mečiar's *demokratura*, as of Tudjman's and Milošević's, were state television, the secret police and the misappropriation of the formerly state-owned economy by regime members and supporters.[7] Television was grotesquely biased and manipulated. The secret police, called the Slovak Information Service (hence SIS, but not to be confused with the British Secret Intelligence Service), bugged, burgled and intimidated Mečiar's opponents. SIS officers were almost certainly implicated in kidnapping the son of the country's president, Michal Kováč, Mečiar's most prominent critic, and the subsequent murder of someone trying to spill the beans on their involvement in the crime. 'Privatization' was a polite word for misappropriation. And then there was nationalist scapegoating of ethnic Hungarians, some 11 per cent of the new state's population. They were denied basic minority rights, such as having street signs in their own language, and ranted against by Mečiar in what one Slovak democrat described to me as 'hate hours'. Relations with Hungary were abysmal.

In this fashion, Slovakia ejected itself from Central Europe. It fell off the 'first wave' list of candidates for Nato and the EU. The Czechs, despairing of their former partner, took up instead with Slovenia, as that most northern, prosperous and peaceful of the former Yugoslav republics successfully sold itself as a Central European state. (There were even quips about Czecho-Slovenia.) Early in 1998, Madeleine Albright – herself of Czech origin – warned that Slovakia could become 'a hole on the map of Europe'. As late as August, Milan Šimečka, one of the country's leading independent journalists, wrote to me, 'The situation here is worse and worse. Yesterday happened something bad in the private TV Markiza, Mečiar is going to take it. He learns from Milošević and Tudjman.'

Then, suddenly, everything changed. In September 1998, Mečiar lost the election. He was peacefully and decisively defeated by a grand coalition of opposition parties, supported by non-governmental organizations, trade unions, independent media and parts of the Catholic Church. When I visited Bratislava in November, there was

a real sense of liberation. Slovakia did not have much of a popular 'velvet revolution' in 1989, and the sociologist Martin Bútora suggested to me that this peaceful overthrow of Mečiar was 'our delayed velvet revolution'. In previous years, people who joined in the 28 October manifestation to mark the founding of Czechoslovakia looked around nervously, fearing Mečiarite surveillance or provocation. This year it was all smiles and celebration. The head of the private Radio Twist told me he used to spend three-quarters of his time defending it against regime harassment: licences revoked, punitive taxes, power lines cut. Now he jokes that he has so much free time he doesn't know what to do with it.

In parliament, I watched the dismantling of two pillars of the *demokratura*, as deputies installed a new supervisory board for state television and a new head of the security service. One deputy prime minister told me how the new government was going to build a true market economy. Another, himself a Hungarian, explained how the rights of the Hungarian minority would be respected.

The governing coalition is a fragile one, but thus far it has made all the right noises. And the West has responded in kind. Madeleine Albright told the new foreign minister in January that 'if Slovakia continues these reforms and keeps improving its relations with its neighbours' then it would be 'a strong candidate' for the next round of Nato enlargement. The French foreign minister encouraged him to believe that the EU might start negotiations with Slovakia before the end of 1999. As if by magic, Slovakia is back in Central Europe again!

If you ask 'Why did it fall out?' you can find several answers. One is the presence of a substantial ethnic minority, who could be made scapegoats – especially because the Hungarians are widely seen as a former oppressor. (Slovakia was part of Hungary until 1918, and subjected to 'Magyarization'.) It has been something close to a rule in the 1990s that the greater the ethnic mix in a post-communist country, the more likely the country has been to take a nationalist authoritarian rather than a liberal democratic path. Those that have done best are also those that are ethnically most homogeneous: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and, yes, Slovenia. (Like all rules, this one has exceptions to prove it, such as Estonia, with its large ethnic Russian population.)

There's a great irony here so far as the Central European debate is concerned. The 1980s revival of the Central European idea involved a celebration of the region's pre-war ethnic and cultural mélange: mixed cities, like Prague or Czernowitz or Bratislava before it was called Bratislava, where people habitually spoke three or four languages; large minorities, especially Jewish and German ones; multiculturalism *avant la lettre*. Yet it seems that one of the preconditions for being seen as part of the political Central Europe in the 1990s was precisely *not* to be Central European in this earlier sense. Or, to put it another way, Slovakia's problem was that it was still a bit too Central European, in the older sense.

Other reasons offered for Slovakia's falling away include the weakness of its pre-1989 opposition. 'There were really only two dissidents in Bratislava before 1989,' the former dissident Miroslav Kusý reminded me. (The other was Milan Šimečka, father of the independent journalist.) This meant there was no liberal counter-elite to take power after the communists fell, leaving the door open for a skilful populist thug like Mečiar. Then there was the fact that Slovakia's only previous experience of nation-statehood was the clerical-fascist state of Monsignor Jozef Tiso, established under licence from Hitler during the Second World War. And this was an agrarian society, with a relatively small bourgeoisie. In other words, Slovakia was missing some vital elements on the 1980s Central European checklist.

But then you have to ask why it succeeded in bouncing back again. Well, there was the proximity to better examples: Slovakia is sandwiched between Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, while Bratislava is an hour's bus ride from Vienna. And there was significant pressure from the West – both active criticism and what has been called the 'passive leverage' of Nato and the EU (i.e. if you don't do X and Y, we simply won't let you in).[8] But perhaps most important was another key item on the 1980s checklist: civil society.

Even in the worst moments of Mečiarism, Slovakia had a vibrant civil society – or what Slovaks call 'the third sector'. There was the powerful Catholic Church. (Although its leaders were rarely outspoken in criticizing Mečiar, prominent lay Catholics were.) There were independent radio stations, magazines and the private television channel Markiza. And there were numerous non-governmental

organizations. Some sixty of these got together before the elections in a countrywide campaign to persuade people to turn out and vote, starting in the remotest mountain villages and working down towards Bratislava. There were mass meetings, posters, pamphlets, T-shirts, buttons, baseball caps and 'Rock the Vote' concerts. Arguably this swung the election. The number of votes cast for Mečiar's party actually increased marginally from the previous election in 1994, but, at least partly thanks to this campaign, the electoral turnout went up much more – from 75 per cent to 84 per cent. It was these new voters who did for Vladimír the Terrible. When I described this civic campaign to opposition friends in Serbia a week later, they threw up their hands in envious despair. So perhaps this was a triumph for Central Europe, in yet another sense.

In sum, the phenomenon of Mečiar shows that a positive political outcome (in shorthand, 'democracy') is not culturally predetermined by a Central European heritage. But the circumstances of his ousting do suggest that it helps.

3

Geopolitical boundaries are not just lines drawn on maps by officials in gilded conference chambers. If they are real, then things change when you cross them on the ground. The Iron Curtain was like that: walk ten yards from Checkpoint Charlie and you were in a different world. If you want to experience such a dividing line in today's Europe, then I suggest you go by foot, as I did on a cold November evening, through the border crossing between Vyšné Nemecké in Slovakia and Užhorod in Ukraine.

The shock is instantaneous. Well-made asphalt roads give way to potholes and cobblestones. The Ukrainian border post seems to have been overrun by shaven-headed, thickset men, dressed in black boots, black jeans, black sweaters and bulging black leather jackets – the uniform of the post-communist mafiosi. I watch them taking customs officials by the elbow for a quiet word in a dark corner. I can almost hear the word 'corruption' hiss through the freezing fog. Murmuring into their mobile phones, they jump into dirty black Volvos – of the

latest, most powerful, model – and screech off down the road.

Pausing only to set our watches forward one hour from Central to East European Time, my companion and I proceed, more sedately, past large, extravagant villas, with giant satellite dishes, security cameras, high walls and metal gates. 'New Ukraine!' exclaims our guide, a professor at Užhorod University, whose own salary is barely $50 a month – and he hasn't been paid for three months. He accepts the hard currency that I give him for a day's guiding services (the equivalent of a month's salary) with a mixture of gratitude and wounded pride, while we both desperately try to keep up the pretence that this is just normal academic collaboration between two of the world's great universities, Oxford and Užhorod.

The hotel demands payment in advance – cash only – and remember to lock your door from the inside. A friend tells how his father-in-law had a small collision with one of those black Volvos. Four men in black jumped out: 'This will cost you $4,500. Cash. We come to your office tomorrow morning.' He rang the police, gave them the Volvo's licence number, and they promised to check it out. An hour later the police rang back. They said, 'When those men call tomorrow, you pay.' This is a different world. Its essential qualities, as in Serbia, are habitual corruption, arbitrariness supported by violence, and a state that either cannot protect you or is itself criminal.

Today, the boundary between Central and eastern Europe – Ukraine, Belarus and European Russia – is clear and deep and real. I've made the case anecdotally, almost flippantly, but one could do so systematically and at length, with supporting statistics and graphs. This is emphatically not to argue cultural predestination. The Huntington line, our new successor to the Curzon line, runs many miles east of here. The line you cross at Užhorod is the western frontier of the former Soviet Union, not the eastern frontier of western Christendom. Nor am I suggesting that these countries are eternally doomed to corruption, chaos and poverty. Indeed, there is a real possibility that western Ukraine and western Belarus, which, like the Baltic states, were part of the Soviet Union for only two generations rather than three, might recover more quickly than the rest. But both the quality and the sheer scale of the problems of post-communism in the states of the eastern Slavs make for a political dividing line that will probably

last for at least another decade. Today, the eastern frontier of the West runs no longer along the river Elbe, nor along the Oder and Neisse, but along two rivers most people have never heard of: the Bug and the Už.

The crossings to the south, by contrast, between Central Europe and what we again call the Balkans, are much less sharp. To walk from Hungary into northern Romania is not to enter a different world. Partly that is because Hungarians live on both sides of the frontier. Both Transylvania and the Banat, which between them comprise more than a third of Romania, are positively marked by the Austro-Hungarian heritage. But even if you take the southern parts of Romania that belonged to the Ottoman empire, the differences in society, politics and economics between Hungary and Romania are nothing like as marked as those between Slovakia and Ukraine.

If you go from the Slovenian part of Istria to the Croatian part, you hardly notice the difference at all. As my *Guida alla Mitteleuropa* rightly suggests, Catholic, formerly Habsburg Croatia clearly qualifies historically as part of Central Europe. Politically, in the 1990s, Croatia has been part of the Balkans. But there is a good chance that it will come back, with Tudjman's *demokratura* crumbling either before or after his death. A new ethnic homogeneity – achieved by ethnic cleansing while the West looked the other way – provides favourable conditions for a return to Central Europe.

There is work for at least another ten years ahead before all those states which have a credible claim to belong to Central Europe by virtue of geography, history and culture will also be part of Central Europe, in the 1990s sense, on account of their current politics and the way they are viewed in the West. It will be longer still before this Central Europe becomes just central Europe, another region of Western Europe, as northern Europe and southern Europe are today. Meanwhile, countries like Ukraine may lift themselves up, especially if the West does more to help them.

Yet Central Europe does have to stop somewhere. To have a purely political, voluntarist definition of it is as absurd as it is to have a purely cultural-determinist one. It has been reasonable enough for the West to make political behaviour the prime criterion of acceptance, saying, in effect, 'Central European is as Central European does.'

But you can't go on for ever suggesting that whichever among the post-communist states exhibits the rule of law, democracy, tolerance, respect for minority rights and interest in peaceful international cooperation will *ipso facto* become part of Central Europe. For example, even if Serbia one day meets all these political criteria, it will not be part of Central Europe. It will still be in the Balkans.

The trouble is that, at the moment, these are not neutral statements. They are heavily charged: positively in the first case, negatively in the second. This is the danger in making any association of a geographical expression with a set of values or aspirations. It's a problem not just with 'Central Europe', but with 'Europe' (as in 'European values') and 'the West' (as in 'Western civilization', or 'Western values' contrasted with 'Asian values').

Yet the difficulty lies precisely in the fact that this association with Central Europe (as with Europe and the West) is *not* completely arbitrary. There is some truth in it. There was a core and a periphery in European historical development. The difference between western Christianity – with its seminal separation of Church and state – and eastern Christianity – with its legacy of 'Caesaro-Papism' – has deeply marked the political history of, say, France as opposed to Russia. And this truth is not just historical. It is also hard contemporary experience. As I was preparing to fly to Slovakia from Heathrow Airport, I met a banker of my acquaintance who travels extensively in CEE. He bluntly summed up his personal findings thus: 'The further east and south you go, the more corruption and chaos.'

The cardinal fault, it seems to me, is to turn probabilities into certainties, grey zones into lines between black and white, and, above all, working descriptions into self-fulfilling prophecies. We know, for example, that the following pairings will be difficult to achieve: Balkan tolerance, Ukrainian prosperity, Russian democracy, Turkish respect for human rights. But to suggest that these are contradictions in terms is not just to relativize our own values. It is also to betray the many, many people who are fighting for these things in these places, against the odds, and sometimes at the risk of their lives.

I have made the case for Central Europe over two decades. I believe it has been a good cause, which has helped to transform the central region of Europe for the better. But I am appalled at the way

the idea has now been recruited into the service of these politics of relativism and exclusion. Whatever and wherever Central Europe is, it should never be part of that.