

# New Perspectives

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# Editorial 01/2015

## To Provoke Constellations

**BENJAMIN TALLIS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Iron Curtain. Prague Spring. Berlin Wall. Gulag. Solidarnosc. Velvet Revolution. ... Bloodlands. Laboratory. Proof ... Avant Garde. Backward. Success-Story. Failure. ... Members. Neighbours. Partners. Rivals. Allies. ... Imperialism. Nationalism. Liberalism. Fascism. Communism. Neo-Nationalism. Neoliberalism. Corruption. Liberal-Market-Democracy. ... Post-Habsburg. Post-Ottoman. Post-Communist. Post-Soviet. Post-Transition. ... Here. There. ... Occupied. Free. Independent. Integrated. ... Dangerous. Beautiful. Monotonous. Vibrant. Surreal. ... Poor But Sexy.<sup>1</sup> Stag-Party Heaven. ... Wild East. Kidnapped West. ... New Europe. Non-core Europe. Mitteleuropa. Eastern Europe. ... Central and Eastern Europe.

### NEW PERSPECTIVES

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is one of the most fascinating, diverse and contested regions in the world. It is also one of the most misunderstood, oversimplified and overlooked. In transforming and re-launching our journal we seek to address this situation by providing interdisciplinary insight into the politics and international relations of CEE. In so doing, we aim to provide a home for – and thus encourage – research that is regionally focused but which goes beyond Area Studies to emphasise international connections (and disconnections) and which brings new perspectives to the study of the region from across the disciplinary spectrum of social research.

With *New Perspectives* we intend to provoke new constellations<sup>2</sup> of scholarship across approaches and disciplines which can challenge received wisdoms on the social, spatial and temporal life of the region. However, while encouraging connectedness, we simultaneously emphasise the importance of the regional particularities, and the commonalities that can be identified amidst the diversities found within and across CEE's contested and shifting borders. We thus challenge approaches that elide these particularities, diversities and commonalities in the sweeping narratives and practices of postcommunist transition that became dominant after history's supposed end.

By fostering interdisciplinary perspectives on CEE politics – broadly understood – we look to widen and deepen interpretive and explanatory frameworks for creating

*useful knowledge on and in the region.* We hope that by provoking new constellations of scholarship *on the region* we will also support the development of scholarship *in the region*, drawing more scholars to work on it and bolstering the international networks of the CEE academic community. We aspire to create opportunities for mutual learning between academics, but also between academia and other regional communities. Our blog – *ceenewperspectives.iir.cz* – combines academic rigour with public accessibility (as well as flexibility) and we maintain an active public and social media presence in order to widen the conversation on issues that matter in and to the region.

It was with these aims that we set out to transform and re-launch the journal *Perspectives* late last year and it is therefore with great pleasure that I have the honour of introducing this first issue of *New Perspectives*. However, although this editorial is single-authored, the transformation process is anything but solitary. We began our work already standing on the substantial shoulders of our predecessor journal – *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* – and from the outset I have benefitted from the rock-solid support of the senior management of the Institute of International Relations (IIR) in Prague and, particularly, from the support of our Director, Petr Kratochvíl. The IIR management also put together the core editorial team of the journal, and I could not wish for more dedicated, intelligent or companionable Associate Editors with whom to undertake this journey than Tomáš Profant and Jan Daniel. We set about recruiting our new Editorial Board and have been overwhelmed by the generosity of spirit (and deed) and the level of positive reaction that we have met. Our Editorial Board comprises leading scholars and rising stars from each of the disciplines we cover, and our board members have been instrumental in spreading the word about the journal, providing the advice that we have needed to get this far, and in creating and helping us seize opportunities to develop and promote *New Perspectives*. For this and for the support we have received from the wider academic community, we are truly grateful.

## FIRST ISSUE: CONTENT

Our transition process is not yet complete, but we are delighted with the plurality of perspectives that the articles in this issue bring to bear on some of the most significant present political questions for the region while engaging some of the eternal questions of socio-political research. In addition to four original research articles, we have the first in a new series of *Intervention* pieces and a *Forum* of responses to the IMEMO think tank's annual Russia and the World forecast.

Poststructuralism meets Liberalism in the intriguing and provocative blend of political and legal philosophy which **Johan van der Walt** uses to explore the unbearable lightness of contemporary governance and the oppressive dangers this poses. Innovatively developing the work of Giorgio Agamben, van der Walt ar-

gues that a “literary” politics holds the key to governing and being governed otherwise and to creating non-oppressive communities. Meanwhile, **Sascha Engel** uses a constructivist lens to examine the international political economy of the Eurozone crisis, showing the central role of the social construction of “contagion” and how this points to the banking reforms that could lead the way out of the present situation. Next **Pelin Ayan Musil** and **Martin Kuta** both focus on aspects of the intersection between Czech domestic and international politics. Ayan Musil explains the seemingly counter-intuitive Czech opposition to Turkish membership of the EU by combining insights from Discursive and Sociological Institutionalism. Kuta’s quantitative analysis of the voting behaviour of Czech MPs on European issues reveals not only a disconnect between Czech representatives and their electorate, but also a disconnect between the electorate and the EU due to the significant shortcomings in the ways that the Lisbon Treaty’s scrutiny and oversight mechanisms are implemented.

In this issue’s *Intervention* piece **Ulrich Kühn** synthesises the Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian traditions of European political thought to argue that NATO must combine power with order and values if it is to create a sustainable and constructive response to Russia. Kühn challenges what he sees as NATO’s currently power-heavy approach and provocatively calls for NATO to go “back to the future” by reviving the “Harmel Plan” which he claims served the alliance well in the past. **We invite responses that critically engage, challenge or endorse Kühn’s Harmel 2.0 proposal and will publish a selection of them as a forum in a forthcoming issue.**

The current issue’s *Forum* is on a related topic as it comprises responses to the Russian think tank **IMEMO’s** annual “Russia and the World” forecast that was published (in abridged form, but for the first time in English) in the last issue of *Perspectives*. The respondents all concur with IMEMO’s assessment that we do not face a “new Cold War” and that the forecast offers some (limited, but still significant) critique of recent Russian foreign policy and, particularly, of the failure to modernise that lies behind Russia’s economic stagnation. However, the respondents also agree that the forecast glosses over the role of Russian domestic politics in connection to Russian actions in the international arena, particularly in Ukraine. **Egbert Jahn** partly ascribes this loud silence to the difficulties that academics face in Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Furthermore, Jahn, **Derek Averde** and **Vladimír Handl** see the forecast as an important call for deeper engagement and rapprochement between Russia and the EU (and the wider “West”). They note IMEMO’s identification of the mutual interest in such improved relations as a hopeful step towards building bridges and avoiding polarisation. **Iver B. Neumann**, however, calls for Russian academics and think tanks to lead the way in formulating better policy options questions. Neumann also questions the forecast’s key premise – that Russia is still a great power – and emphasises the need to learn from rather than ignore Russian history if Russian do-

mestic political, social and economic issues are to be addressed and if relations between Russia and the West are to be improved. We look forward to IMEMO's response and to continuing the discussion that was our motivation for publishing the forecast.

## **LITERARY POLITICS, BELONGING, DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITY**

Despite their plurality, the pieces in the first issue of *New Perspectives* cohere around several key themes, which also strongly relate to the rationale of the journal: the politics of belonging, democracy and community.

Giorgio Agamben's work has become increasingly influential in CEE, as it has in other regions, and the translation of several key texts (most notably *Homo Sacer*) into regional languages – including Czech and Polish – has furthered this process. From International Relations to contemporary art, Agamben's critiques of, *inter alia*, the politics of the generalised (or at least potentially generalisable) exception and the dangers this poses for political life as well as individual human lives have gained significant traction. However, Agamben's work has also attracted its share of discontents – myself included.

Johan van der Walt's article addresses several of the concerns related to Agamben's thought, particularly those relating to the a-social or anti-social qualities of Agamben's transcendent messianism or "neo-stoicism" (see, e.g., Huysmans, 2008). Making clear the stake of this endeavour – in a time of growing state surveillance and increased resort to exceptional politics in Europe – van der Walt develops an underexplored insight about the Christian ecclesia in Agamben's work to call for a transformation of political exceptionalism into literary exceptionalism. Based on Saint Paul's instruction to the Christian community "to live under the law of the Emperor as if not living under his law," this resonates with the activities of Charter 77 and other groups in CEE who, while living under communist rule, lived as if not bound by its law, demanding rights as if they would be respected and upheld by the regime. It is this fictional (but not fictitious) quality that leads van der Walt, via the work of Paul Celan, Michel Foucault, and Italo Calvino, to the "literary example," the "literary exception" and the "literary community". He sees this literary community as having much in common with Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the "Inoperative Community" (1991), which avoids the dangers of creating an oppressive politics of exception. Van der Walt's piece, which significantly advances Agambenian scholarship, must be read in full – for the rare beauty of its language and concepts, as well as the force of its arguments and its contemporary and historical political relevance – and we are therefore delighted to provide free access to this groundbreaking work. We look forward to your engagements with it on our blog – [ceenewperspectives.iir.cz](http://ceenewperspectives.iir.cz) – and in future issues of *New Perspectives*.

It is appropriate that van der Walt draws upon the work of Paul Celan, who was born as Paul Antschel into a German-speaking Jewish family in the Romanian town Cernăuți, which they called Czernowitz and is now known as the Ukrainian town Chernivtsi, and later had to flee both Soviet and Nazi persecution. Celan is not only one of the most revered poets of the twentieth century, but his biography makes him an exemplary and exceptional as well as literary Central and East European. CEE has experienced first hand the perils of the highly “operative” communities decried by Nancy (and by Susan Sontag in *Fascinating Fascism*), which essentialise to include and exclude; which make myths to make live as well as to make or let die. Rather than overt myth making, utopian vision or caricature nationhood, van der Walt takes Calvino’s notion that literary communities are founded on a “secret that cannot be revealed” and are constituted through an “upheaval that cannot take shape and cannot be named”. Living “as if not” could therefore hold great appeal in CEE although how such an inoperative literary community could work in practice is a matter for debate. The notion of basing community on negative affiliation – albeit in “real communication with the otherness of other lives” – rather than the positive affirmation of living “as if”, or indeed living “as”, raises wider questions about the role of visionary politics in making and maintaining liberal and illiberal communities. Whether CEE remains a prime site of such communal experimentation and literary imagination, as it was in the twentieth century, also remains to be seen (see, e.g., Sayer, 2013).

Johan van der Walt is clear that the goal of the literary community that he advocates is to “stabilise” the political – to allow for “regular” liberal democratic politics, which will re-assure some and disappoint others, again pointing to wider discussions over reform, revolution or the maintenance of the political status quo. However, the regular functioning of democratic mechanisms (as well as concerns over inclusion and exclusion) also lies at the heart of Martin Kuta, Pelin Ayan Musil and Sascha Engel’s articles. Each of these pieces underscores van der Walt’s assertion that political stability (and, I would add, an inclusive community), if produced, will be “produced arduously.” Kuta’s work shows the importance, but also the current lack of the basic, even banal democratic accountability over EU issues in the Czech Republic that would allow Czech citizens to better enact their political belonging in the EU. Ayan Musil shows the role of discourses and social relations in conditioning institutional involvement in Turkish struggles for recognition and formal inclusion with the circuits, mechanisms and institutions of EU-European belonging. She implicates political leaders and the media in the construction of Turkish identity as that of the other, which thus needs to be excluded. This takes on particular relevance in the context of current CEE debates (or the lack there of) on refugees and migration. Crucially, Ayan Musil emphasises the agency of the audience and thus the role that we, in CEE and beyond, can potentially play in influencing such

debates. Conversely, Engel shows what happens when the possibility for influence and contestable politics is removed or at least veiled, and how this can lead to the labelling of actors in various combinations of inclusion and exclusion, power and weakness. The effects of constructing and labelling some countries as trustworthy – on the basis of “market trust in their future trust[worthiness]” – obscures the potential to politically address the practices of the European banking system that Engel argues lie at the heart of the Eurozone crisis. In their own way, all of the articles show the arduous work required to stabilise politics and challenge or maintain the boundaries of political community.

We see *New Perspectives* as very much part of the political and social struggles over knowledge production, but also of those over the formation and re-formation of community and the political in and beyond Central and Eastern Europe.

### **IN MEMORIAM, IN IMAGINATION: TO PROVOKE CONSTELLATIONS**

Amidst the hope and happiness that relaunching the journal brings, the mood is also tinged with sadness as the first issue of *New Perspectives* comes only weeks after the death of Professor Svetlana Boym. Her ill health – and undergoing surgery – prevented her from taking up our invitation to join the Editorial Board, which she had hoped to be able to do in due course. Svetlana Boym’s work suggested or pioneered many of the rationales that infuse the transformation and re-launch of our journal. While working on Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, she refused to be bound by condescending social hierarchies, constricting geographies or reductively historicising accounts of transition. Instead she explored the socio-cultural experiences and memories of people and peoples of the region, their connections to and divisions from others and elsewhere, and the ways they narrate, visualise and materialise their worlds, our worlds. Her keen eye, sharp yet sympathetic ear and literary imagination combined with her rich erudition to cross disciplinary boundaries with ease. Her (academic) practice evolved in productive tension with the areas of her interest as she cast her net wider, yet found a still sharper focus, retaining a sense of both the ocean and the shell, the bigger picture and the telling detail, and their resonances and dissonances. As she was a novelist, a visual artist and an academic read beyond academia, it is impossible to do justice to Svetlana Boym’s oeuvre in this editorial and so we therefore **invite contributions to a special forum in memory of Svetlana Boym**, which we will publish in a future issue of the journal. However, on a personal note, it was especially her seminal book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) that brought a wealth of new perspectives to my thinking about identities, borders, and orders and helped me see Europe – Western, Central and Eastern – in and through new constellations. It seems fitting in these circumstances to recall, as Boym does, Vaclav Havel’s



injunction that we should not treat twilight as the sunset of energies, but as a time of contemplation (*ibid.*: 223).

Reading Svetlana Boym together with Johan van der Walt raises the possibility of a literary politics in and of CEE to contemplate the calling into being of a (literary) CEE community and the role of academics in this. It prompts us to think about what we do when we read and write, about who, what, how and in which relations we read and write. If van der Walt is right that we should not simply chronicle or commemorate but also engage our literary imaginations, we need to ask how we can create and keep “secret[s] that cannot be revealed” and instigate “upheaval[s] that ha[ve] not taken shape and ha[ve] no name” as we call our communities into being.

As part of our role in these processes, *New Perspectives* seeks to encourage and publish original research that is *methodologically systematic, rigorous and reflexive; theoretically innovative and compelling; or empirically ground-breaking*. We interpret the borders of “Central and Eastern Europe” broadly and fluidly and want submissions that reflect this and which address *political aspects of regional affairs and their connections to the wider world* from the fields of International Relations, Security Studies and International Political Sociology; International Political Economy; Geography; Sociology; Anthropology; History; Cultural Studies; Legal Studies and other related disciplines.

And so I address you to provoke constellations ...

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Former Mayor of Berlin Klaus Wowereit famously described the German capital as “poor but sexy”, a phrase that subsequently became common currency and, later, the title of a book on “Culture Clashes in Europe East and West” (Pyzik, 2014). Similarly, the term “Bloodlands” has been widely used since the publication of Timothy Snyder’s (2010) book of the same name.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of “provoking constellations” is borrowed from Inga Zimprich’s letter from “The Department of Practice” of the “Faculty of Invisibility”, which appears in the faculty’s “Communique” (2007) as part of a wider contemporary art project coordinated from the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht but involving artists from across Europe.

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