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Vlastimil Vondruška and the Inevitable Demise of Europe

The aim of this paper is to analyse Vlastimil Vondruška's novel *The Chronicle of the demise of Europe* (2019) in the context of Milan Kundera's concept of Central Europe. This comparison will allow us to understand the context and temporality of Vondruska's vision of Europe's decline and Central European specificities. We will then try to situate Vondruška's work in the political and cultural reality of the Czech Republic and Central Europe. In his famous 1983 essay on Central Europe, Milan Kundera went on to describe this imagined space as 'kidnapped West' – the lost world of Western culture:

Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space" (Kundera 2023, 37).

This concept of geopolitical-cultural space, as flawed as it may be (see Slačálek 2020), is one of the exemplary texts showing the fixation of Czech opposition intellectuals on the imagined West during the period of communist dictatorship (see also Bolton 2012). After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, a so-called liberal consensus emerged, uniting the

media, public intellectuals and major political parties across the left-right spectrum with the common goal of 'returning to the West'. When some of the main goals were achieved (the Czech Republic joined both NATO and the EU), this consensus began to crumble. Euroscepticism and a backlash against multiculturalism, together with Islamophobia, rose to prominence, both with the conservative (economically neoliberal) right and with seemingly anti-political and pragmatic populism (see, for example, Kopeček 2024, Gjuričová 2009 or Slačálek 2021).

The end of the liberal consensus also marked the beginning of heated debates in the literary field about so-called committed literature (*angažovaná literatura*), which for some (mostly older) generation of critics seemed to be a return to the norms of socialist literature, with its emphasis on correct values and representations rather than on the quality of writing. The younger generation and leftist writers and intellectuals, on the other hand, sought literature and criticism that dealt with important social and cultural issues. In the shadow of these debates, another kind of social criticism in literature grew, this time highly subversive, coming from popular literature and reassessing the meaning of Central Europe and national identities 40 years after Kundera published his essay (see Segi 2021 and 2023).

Vlastimil Vondruška occupies a prominent place among authors who reassess the place of the Czech Republic and the Czechs in Europe and the 'West'. Since 2002, he has been publishing several sequels a year to his extremely popular historical detective stories, and occasionally other prose and popularisation texts. According to the available statistics, he is (by some distance) the most borrowed author in the Czech public

library network and almost all of his books enter the top 10 of the sales charts in Czech bookstores.

He is also a highly controversial writer. After the revolution of 1989, he had to leave his research position as a historian and ethnologist because of his involvement in the Czechoslovak Communist Party. For a long time, his popular novels received virtually no critical response and, at first glance at least, appear to be completely apolitical. Only gradually did they become more and more involved in the context of contemporary culture wars, serving as a template for the natural state of society and culture. For example, one of his historical plays (in which Vondruška himself plays the role of a wise old scribe) is advertised with the following slogan:

Let us look back to the times when our ancestors defended their country against enemies with weapons in hand [...]. Let us look back to the time when men behaved like knights and no one punished them for sexual harassment, and when it was an honour for women to be women. (Youtube 2016)

With this notion of enemies, brave ancestors and longing for past glories, we can use Umberto Eco's typology of neo-medievalism from his essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* to conclude that the past in Vondruška's crime novels and plays is clearly the Middle Ages of "national identities, so powerful again during the last century, when the medieval model was taken as a political utopia, a celebration of past grandeur, to be opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination" (Eco 2014, 70). It is therefore unsurprising that his most popular crime novels are set in thirteenth century Bohemia, at the time of the rapid growth of the Bohemian Empire. This serves to provide a stark contrast to the contemporary semi-peripheral position of the Czech Republic.

The conservative or restorative nature of his writing was largely overlooked by critics. Despite Vondruškas' unprecedented success, there was almost no critical reception of his work. It was only after he began publishing his essays in mainstream newspapers and publishing them in collected volumes such as the anti-elitist *Epistles about the Elites and the People* (2018) that historians and fact-checkers began to analyse and criticise different aspects of his work (see, for example, Šorm 2021, Šíma 2022 or Segi 2023).

In his essays, which deal more with general issues of civilisation than with actual politics, Vondruška presents himself as a thinker who is ideologically explicit, seemingly objective, but whose universe of values is close to many of the elements characteristic of the successful Central European amalgam of right-wing conservative populism that emphasises tradition and a strong state, combined with American alt-right rhetoric and the idea of the endangered white man. In his essays, he advocates for the common people against both Czech and European elites, and cautions against the potential dangers of multiculturalism, environmentalism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

A characteristic motif of Vondruška's essays interpreting the present are historical comparisons in which Brussels becomes Rome and the European Union becomes the Roman Empire in its decline. While for Kundera, Central Europe represents the integral space of the West, which has been torn out by historical circumstances ("They cannot be separated from European history; they cannot exist outside it; but they represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders" Kundera 2023, 49.) and which, in contrast, is characterised by the central role of culture ("Their picture of the West, then, is of the West in the past, of a West in which culture had not yet entirely

bowed out" Kundera 2023, 55.), Vondruška's conception is just the opposite. For him, the European project represents a naive attempt to overcome the "natural" and historically determined state of competing nation-states. The attempt to become 'the West' is only a misguided game of the elites, and the outsiderism of Central Europe makes it possible to see the West as a place where culture stands against human 'nature'. In this case, it is precisely the lower degree of culturalism and detachment from the practice of life that is supposed to represent the civilizational advantage of Central Europeans over the decadence of the West.

The Chronicle

As the author himself argues, he has embodied the ideas from his essays in prose form in a complex, 800 pages long *The Chronicle of the Demise of Europe 1984-2054* (2019), conceived as a synthesis of a memory and a dystopian novel. It takes the form of a chronicle of the (fictional) Wagner family, whose lives take place against the background of (actual) history and who happen to play the more active role in the future. At the time of its publication in 2019, the reader found himself exactly in the middle of the narrative timeline. The first half of the novel, entitled *How it all began*, focuses mainly on the adaptation of the family members to fundamental social changes after 1989. Political, cultural and historical events like the Balkan wars, the Czech integration into European Union, culture wars and migrant crisis gradually influence the lives of the individual characters. The main protagonist of this part is sociologist turned pragmatic businessman Adam Wagner who represents calm rationality while his idealistic ex-wife gradually becomes the main antagonist of the story.

In the second part, titled *How it could end*, the Wagner family, facing the decline of social order and the growing threat of a Muslim military invasion from islamized Germany, turns increasingly to conservatism. Finally, the family and their friends fortify themselves in a private castle, where they fully return to 'traditional' medieval values and successfully resist the German-Muslim army with the help of smuggled Russian weapons.

This dark fantasy of future development, inspired in part by Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*, draws a sharp contrast between the decadent West, rational Central Europe and an East that defies our understanding and therefore cannot be easily judged.¹ In many ways, Vondruška's conception of Central European 'rationality' corresponds to what Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek call "centrist populism"². The politicians Vondruška defends in his essays (and, ultimately, in the novel) are not ideologues and to a large extent distance themselves from the right-wing divide. At the same time, they are able to frame their pragmatism as an opposition to the ideologised West. In the book *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism And Populism*, czech president Miloš zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš are described exactly as pragmatic strong leaders, that Vondruška cannot find in the West: Zeman took on the mantle of a cultural plebeian loathed by the snobbish Prague elite for his boorish manners (likened to those of the communist apparatchiks of the 1970s and 1980s). The anti-corruption and anti-political (i.e., technocratic) programme which lifted Babiš to power was similarly formal and ideologically empty. (Barša, Hesová and Slačálek 2021, 23)

¹ Vondruška was critical of virtue-signalling in the first phase of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. It was only after the full-scale Russian invasion that he stopped defending Russia.

² Drawing from Groupe d'études géopolitiques (2019).

Both Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš used, above all, the rhetoric of leadership, competences and economic improvement. [...] Their majoritarian populism also included some attacks on ethnic or religious minorities and outsiders but no more than was standard among other political forces (only Zeman's Islamophobia was much higher than this standard). Both brought about depoliticization based on a rhetoric of corruption in the political class, economic performance (Babiš's 'running the state like a company') and technocracy (Slačálek 2021, 163).

Vondruška enriches this concept of Central European anti-ideological and anti-elite populism with a scientific and historical mythology that explains it, gives it a global and historical context and a semblance of credibility. In the novel, this effect is achieved through the form of a family saga. Several generations of the Wagner family travel around the world, and from the fragments of their perspectives the reader pieces together a certain 'state of the world'. Whether teaching gender studies at Italian universities, doing a doctorate in the USA or conducting biological research in entomology in Germany, the various Wagners and their contemporaries compare their experiences with those of Central Europe and bring back news of the gradual decline of the world and the elite's detachment from reality. Even the Faculty of Philosophy at Prague's Charles University, under pressure from the fictional Society of Correct Europeans and European Women, becomes an ordinary Western institution, more interested in moral appeals than in the knowledge of truth.

As in his essays, Vondruška uses historical metaphor to describe the current political, social and cultural situation and to warn of the consequences of the current direction. Central to this is the figure of the sociologist Adam Wagner – Vondruška's alter

ego – an ostracised intellectual who is able to predict the direction of history on the basis of historical parallels. In the narrative, this point is particularly reinforced by the fact that Wagner spends the entire first half of the book predicting events that have actually happened despite the efforts of liberal elites (such as the first election of Donald Trump as US president). This narrative technique then makes the other catastrophic predictions seem plausible and even inevitable. When Wagner claims that “just as Rome has become a gilded bubble without power and influence, so too will Brussels” (Vondruška 2019, chap. 7), this is not mere conjecture, but a ‘scientifically’ confirmed prediction that will come true, just like everything else Adam Wagner has predicted.

A key turning point – analogous to the fall of the Roman Empire – is the question of ‘barbarians’ – this time immigrants from the Middle East. Vondruška has often touched on the sensitive moment of the so-called refugee crisis, the quotas for their admission and the question of morality associated with the admission of refugees. Although most of the Czech political scene operates on Islamophobic premises to some extent – not only former president Miloš Zeman, but also the conservative right and the populists – Vondruška’s essays and novel are not overtly racist in the sense of a theory of racial or cultural superiority. While Kundera’s idea of Central Europe is based on national and cultural plurality, for Vondruška cultural isolationism and the notion of the incompatibility of cultures are key. For Vondruška, the relative national homogeneity of Czech society is its main advantage. This is also why the Czechs are able to resist the invasion of Muslim armies at the end of the novel, which (similarly to Houellebecq’s fantasy) dominate Western Europe due to their higher natality and greater will to power compared to the decadent Western population. The new Europe will then be built (after the triumph of the

Czech armies under the Wagner family) on new foundations, devoid of ideology and based on the pragmatism of much smaller, nationally defined groups.

Vondruška devotes considerable space to the question of the morality of this isolationism and pragmatism, and we can read his novel as an attempt to prove that any form of interventionism will ultimately backfire on its actors. Anyone who tries to help refugees (from Bosnia, Syria and later elsewhere) will only tip the balance further away from healthy pragmatism. Even the most optimistic characters understand by the end of the novel that letting refugees into Europe, despite good intentions, means destruction, and even giving food to starving children only leads to more dependency and more waves of migration. For him, pragmatism means seeing through this moral trap and taking a firm grip on power.

The same pragmatic, anti-elitist stance applies to culture. Whereas Kundera sees high culture as a sign of Central Europe, as its special feature, which the West has abandoned in favour of consumerism and whose importance it has forgotten, Vondruška sees modern art as just another symbol of decadence. Long passages mocking modern art and (fictitious) committed drama directed against Miloš Zeman contrast with the enthusiasm for the faux medieval folk art practised by members of the Wagner family in their prepperian fortress, which reflects the feudal order of society. Against the nihilism and elitism of modern art, he juxtaposes amusement and directness – a kind of vindication of Vondruška's work as such, which critics have ignored at best and ridiculed at worst. But Vondruška and populist centrist politicians are not the only declinists here. For Kundera (but also for Havel in the 1970s), the West is also in decline:

That's why in Central European revolts there is something conservative, nearly anachronistic: they are desperately trying to restore the past, the past of culture, the past of the modern era. It is only in that period, only in a world that maintains a cultural dimension, that Central Europe can still defend its identity, still be seen for what it is. The real tragedy for Central Europe, then, is not Russia but Europe: this Europe that represented a value so great that the director of the Hungarian News Agency was ready to die for it, and for which he did indeed die. Behind the iron curtain, he did not suspect that the times had changed and that in Europe itself Europe was no longer experienced as a value. He did not suspect that the sentence he was sending by telex beyond the borders of his flat country would seem outmoded and would not be understood (Kundera 2023, 58).

The difference, of course, is that in Vondruška's eyes the value that Europe represents is nothing but an illusion. It is a deceptive idea that something can transcend its values on the basis of culture alone, because history teaches us that there is only power and the will to power. Everything else is just a feudal, communist or capitalist facade. While Kundera sees Russia as a threat to the very character of Central Europe ("How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space?" Kundera 2023, 37), for Vondruška it is only doing what everyone else does – using its power to control others. For Vondruška, the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia is not a Central European tragedy, but just another change of ruling elites. Through this lens, Moscow is no better or worse than Brussels. The problem with modern Europe is therefore not that it has forgotten its common values, but rather that its individual national identities need to be restored, because history inevitably punishes any form of idealism. Central Europeans should not yearn to become part of the imagined West again, but they must see through this illusion and fight pragmatically for their own version of the past, present and future.

Conclusion

Vondruška's novel is emblematic of a broader political change and the advent of new populist-nationalist and/or conservative parties in Central Europe, including the Czech centrist populists. The novel's primary focus is the retelling of recent history through the lens of the schism between the elite and the people, the nation and 'Brussels'. In contrast to the return to Europe observed by the liberal consensus as a 'normal' state of Central Europe after the 1989 revolution,³ the novel depicts the West in a state of sharp moral decline and the Czech return to Europe is framed as mere game of domestic and international elites. In the near future, Central Europe, described by liberal critics as a 'pupil' of the developed West, can now become a teacher and demonstrate the limitations of ideologies such as multiculturalism and moral liberalism, which stand in opposition to the unchangeable rules of nature and history.

What Kundera once understood as the kidnapped West characterised by its complex ethnic and cultural mix, is understood in this narrative as a state (or even more explicitly as an ethnicity or culture) that is lost in the West, where it does not belong (both ethnically and culturally) and where it is forced to feel and act as an inferior entity. The solution to this problem in the novel is not a balanced development but a return to former glories, isolationism and the time-honoured values of an imaginary Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to entirely disregard Vondruška's anti-elitism, medievalism and anti-Western sentiments. We can read them also as a critique of alienation in the age of global capitalism. His *Chronicle* is not merely a literary

³ Some described the repeated victory of Czech president Miloš Zeman as a 'teenage rebellion' against the West that had been until this point looked up to.

manifestation of an inferiority complex; it is also a voice that yearns for *gemeinschaft* over *gesellschaft*, drawing upon the long tradition of anticivilizational utopias. The manor of the Wagner Family, which represents the last bastion of Western civilisation against the Muslim army, can be seen as just another example of the fictional refugees of modern man attempting to unite with nature (both human nature and the natural environment). When viewed in this broader context, it can be argued that it is only marginally different from Kundera's imagined Central Europe of small multicultural states with a penchant for high culture and Western values. It only represents its anti-elitist mirror image.

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Being East European (from a Polish perspective)

Response to Stefan Segi

My response concerned a paper on the work of the Czech writer Vlastimil Vondruška and the discourse of ‘political correctness’. In my response, I tried to outline how the concept of political correctness was used in Polish political novels written by right-wing writers and journalists (Bronisław Wildstein, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Paweł Lisicki). I’m trying to compare the Czech situation with the Polish one, because here one can find many right-wing populist political novels. Perhaps even the majority of Polish political novels written since 1989 can be labelled this way.

This raises the question: how can we read such a novel? I feel that there are basically two approaches to a work of art – literary or visual – one could call them: ‘exegetical’ or ‘critical’. So, one can either hermeneutically explicate texts and build contexts, or - one can read against the text, looking for inconsistencies and blind spots. How, then, to read right-wing/conservative historical or contemporary novels? The question is all the more relevant as there are also, as I mentioned above, quite a few right-wing political novels in Polish literature since 1989. The authors are often right-wing publicists and figures of power, such as Bronisław Wildstein, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Paweł Lisicki and others. They tend to follow a similar pattern – a concern for the endangered Polish, male and Catholic identity. Of course, a great deal changed here

in 2015, i.e. the so-called refugee crisis from Middle Eastern countries (which overlapped with the double elections in Poland – presidential and parliamentary). And here the issue of Islam clearly emerged – in public discourse as well as in novels (and journalism).

If we want to read more critically than exegetically, it would be good to look for a framework, a socio-political framework. So, one can ask the question: what is ‘political correctness’? Today, for me, this concept is a bit historical, as if it has disappeared from the Polish public discourse (it appeared ‘woke’ instead); but for a long time, it was present. What does the term mean? Whose political vocabulary does it belong to? At least in Poland – to the dictionary of the Polish right wing. And it was created by American conservatives and was supposedly meant to defend the rights of minorities. Again - at least in Poland, this has never been the case. It seems that the concept of political correctness cannot be well understood without the notion of cultural hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), which translates into political power. It is worth remembering that the notion of hegemony does not simply mean the strongest subject or actor in the political field, but rather the one who is able to define this field and at the same time draw dividing lines that will apply to all (*divide et impera*).

In Poland, when the concept of ‘political correctness’ was used, LGBT marches were thrown with stones, banned by the mayor of Warsaw, etc. So it was a concept that enabled the right to attack minorities or the emancipation of women. This was part of neoconservative rhetoric. Perhaps, then, the concept of political correctness should be understood literally – as actions in line with the dominant political power. In Poland in the 2000s, it would therefore be the ‘John Paul II generation’. A phenomenon created by publicists and completely in line with the ideas of the right-wing conservative ruling party of the time. And in that sense, it was *literally* ‘politically correct’.

There is also a contradiction in Vondruška's work – he complains about the omnipresent censorship but writes about it in books that are immensely popular with readers. A separate issue will be the anti-Muslim discourse and the inseparably connected vision of Europe. Islamophobia in Europe can take many forms – including liberal-progressive and also feminist. But there is also an anti-Muslim discourse from the right (in Poland mostly religious and this may be the difference between Poland and the Czech Republic). Monika Bobako, a Polish philosopher and author of the book *Islamobobia jako technologia władzy [Islamophobia as a technology of power. A study in political anthropology]* uses the term 'Islamophobia of resentment' in this context. In these approaches, Europe is synonymous with secular modernity (and the key ideals of individual autonomy and freedom) and which is the opposite of the 'Islamic world' (understood as the domain of non-modern or anti-modern values). Bobako writes:

Besieged by the secularized culture of individualism and moral permissiveness of the West, the preachers of conservative Christian Islamophobia thus fight against Islam, which, while being in their perception the enemy of Christianity, at the same time symbolizes what they consider to be their goal and their greatest value: the return of a society subordinated to religious principles (Bobako 2017, 316).

And another thesis of hers: the specificity of the Polish variant of this discourse is closely related to the fact of Poland's semi-peripheral location, i.e. within 'Eastern or Central Europe'. This issue is discussed by influential Polish literary critic Przemysław Czapliński in his recent book *Poruszona mapa: wyobraźnia geograficzno-kulturowa polskiej literatury przełomu XX i XXI wieku* (2016) [*Displaced map. The Geographical and Cultural Imagination of Polish Literature at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Century*]. He titles the first chapter of his monograph in a very characteristic way: *The East, or the Dirt of Europe* and gives the motto from Wolfgang Buscher's book – "The East is something nobody wants. What everyone shrugs off from his coat as if a bird had

nibbled on his sleeve. The label of East is passed on - to the East” (Czapliński 2016, 12).

And that’s why – in short – ‘Central Europe’ was born. The concept of ‘Eastern Europe’, too, was once created. This is described by Larry Woolf in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1995), which recently was translated into Polish (2020), almost two decades since its first edition in English. Woolf claims it was the French Enlightenment that shifted the coordinates, from a north-south axis to an east-west one. So, earlier, Poland was supposed to belong to the ‘barbaric north’ and was – In short – the better option than to ‘Eastern Europe’. Much earlier, influential Polish literary historian Maria Janion wrote very similarly on this subject in her 1972 book *Romantyzm, rewolucja, marksizm. Colloquia gdańskie [Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism. The colloquia in Gdańsk]*. Unfortunately, Woolf knew nothing about this and does not mention Janion’s conceptualization in his book. Even though he was writing about ‘Eastern Europe’ (and Poland).

This (semi)peripheral location of Poland is often combined with a feeling of not being quite in Europe, not quite European. And sometimes – paradoxically – racism/Islamophobia can be a (horrible) way of joining Europe and being a ‘true European’. This strange logic is described by Monika Bobako.

After accession to the European Union, one might have thought that this way of thinking and affects would disappear – but it did not. Case in point – Ivan Kalmar’s very interesting and challenging book *White But Not Quite. Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt*. He uses not so much the notion of ‘race’ (in relation to Central Europe), but of racialization of the people from the region. And the region is precisely Central Europe

(Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) – and the reaction to the neoliberal economic transformation after 1989.

And this would be the framework for analyzing right-wing political novels from Poland (and Central and Eastern Europe). In the most general terms, they give wrong answers to well-asked questions. This is because these narratives are based on a strong national identity and scapegoating of its enemies. There is almost always a scapegoat in a Girardian sense (LGBTQ people, feminists, or Muslim immigrants).

Therefore, a much better response and reaction to the economic transformation seems to me to be other novels. In Poland, especially Dorota Masłowska's novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (2003), translated as *Snow White and Russian Red* by Benjamin Paloff. The main protagonist is a young boy – very frustrated, very aggressive and very stoned, with no knowledge of foreign languages, an inhabitant of the Polish periphery. He meets a series of girlfriends who represent different political languages (conservatism, feminism, environmentalism), which are immediately parodied. For here the political has become the language itself - and therefore the slang spoken by the main character. The novel reveals complexes and frustrations more than it looks for enemies and scapegoats. This is why I think it is one of the best political novels in Poland since 1989.

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