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Going Native? The Discipline of IR in Central and Eastern Europe

The discipline of the International Relations has been experiencing a robust growth in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) during the last decade. After the 1990s, which was the period of either foundation or re-foundation or revival, depending on the country we speak about, the CEE IR has gained sound institutions and it has been producing significant volumes of academic output in terms of teaching and publications. On the other hand, so far the CEE authors have only marginally contributed to the top IR journals and to the top monograph series in IR, and they did not offer any new ideas to the international discipline¹.

This article argues that this marginalization comes from the previous CEE development strategy of the return to the West, which now needs to be changed into a new strategy of the contribution to the West. It starts with a brief review of the key strengths and weaknesses of the IR in the CEE. Following this I argue that the CEE scholars need to go beyond the copying of the Anglo-American IR concepts. Instead, they need to reflect on the political realities of their societies and to tap into the CEE intellectual traditions to develop the concepts of their own. At the same time, they should not give up on the conceptual background of the Anglo-American discipline which can often accommodate the intellectual and political needs of the CEE, nor should they abandon the scholarly rigour which the international discipline has developed.

Strengths and weaknesses

The table 1 summarizes the key strengths and the key weaknesses of the current IR disciplines in the CEE. It uses two perspectives. First, institutions refer to the

¹ J. Batora, N. Hynek, *On the IR Barbaricum in Slovakia*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 186–193; E. Berg, M. Chillaud, *An IR Community in the Baltic States: Is There a Genuine One?*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 193–199; J. Czaputowicz, *Theory or Practice? The State of International Relations in Poland*, „European Political Science” 2012, No. 11, 196–212; P. Drulák, *Introduction to the International Relations (IR) in Central and Eastern Europe Forum*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 168–173; P. Drulák, R. Druláková, *Czech Republic*, [in:] *International Relations in Europe: Traditions, Perspectives and Destinations*, K.E. Joergensen and T.B. Knudsen (eds.), London 2006; V. Morozov, *Obsessed With Identity: the IR in Post-Soviet Russia*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 200–205; P. Bilgin, O. Tannir, *A Story Telling of IR in the Periphery: Telling Turkey About the World, Telling the World About Turkey*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 174–189; P. Roter, *At the Centre and Periphery Simultaneously: the Incomplete Internalization of Slovenian International Relations*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2009, No. 12(2), p. 180–186.

quality of conditions within which the discipline is practiced. Second, the intellectual perspective is about the academic quality of research.

Table 1

Strengths and weaknesses of the current IR disciplines

	strength	weakness
institutional	working research and education institutions	limits of budgets, limits of size
intellectual	ability to passively work within the IR	disability to actively contribute to the IR

Source: own work.

The institutional strength comes from the fact that the national IR communities can count on working research and education institutions such as university departments, research institutes, libraries, journals and publishers. Moreover, at the regional level there are such institutions as the Central and Eastern European International Studies Association, which organizes regular IR conferences inspired by the American ISA model, and “Journal of International Relations and Development” being a high-quality peer-reviewed journal. Intellectually, it is important that scholars have become familiar with the conceptual and methodological tools of the Anglo-American IR as well as with its academic standards. Unlike in the 1990s, they understand the „language“ of IR².

On the other hand, budgetary limitations significantly constrain the opportunities for professional development³. They limit scholarly mobility and access to the literature but they also make teaching hours long and they force young scholars especially to take up additional jobs. Also, a limited size of national disciplines does not allow for a sufficiently deep specialisation nor does it generate enough competition among scholars. These limits also have impact on academic quality of research. Scholars struggle to publish in recognized journals and book series. If they participate in the international division of academic labour, it is usually in the role of regional experts who are expected to provide data rather than make a contribution by sharing ideas⁴.

However, this failure to genuinely contribute to the discipline can be only partially blamed on the unfavourable research conditions. The individual research choices matter, too. By their choices the CEE scholars have so far failed to develop any comparative advantage which would allow them contribution.

² P. Drulák, R. Druláková, *Czech Republic*, *op.cit.*; P. Drulák, J. Karlas, L. Königová, *Central and Eastern Europe: Between Continuity and Change*, [in:] *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, A.B. Tickner, O. Waever (eds), London 2009, p. 242–260.

³ P. Roter, *At the Centre and Periphery...*, *op.cit.*

⁴ P. Bilgin, O. Tanrisever, *A Story Telling of IR...*, *op.cit.*; J. Czaputowicz, *Theory or Practice?...*, *op.cit.*

What next?

To develop the comparative advantage which would enable the CEE scholars to contribute to the international discipline in a more meaningful manner than it has been the case so far, the scholars need to take into account their own embeddedness. The discipline of IR is always embedded in the community which is defined by traditions, institutions and challenges which the community faces. A good IR scholarship is able to reflect and to develop on these traditions, institutions and challenges. What does it mean in practice?

First, the CEE scholarship needs to rediscover its own intellectual traditions. For example, in the 20th century the Central Europe could boast about a number of exceptional thinkers, who usually turned into politicians and who developed their own thinking about international politics⁵. Today, they are either forgotten or treated as museum pieces which testify about the past without giving anything to the present. Still, such figures as Roman Dmowski, Tomáš G. Masaryk, Milan Hodža, István Bibó or Edvard Kardelj left over important intellectual legacies. They could be of inspiration to Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian or Slovenian and other scholars who do research on small states, on European integration, on Central Europe, on the international system and on other themes which these intellectual and political leaders addressed in their writings.

Second, the CEE scholarship needs to properly address the key international political challenges which their communities are facing, such as their relationships to the West and to the East, atlanticism, political marginalisation, national minorities, and the politics of history, among others. However, this does not mean production of more case studies which are either purely descriptive or which try to mechanically apply the standard concepts and methods to these issues. There has been no shortage of a such research. What we need is a theoretical research. The concepts and the methods of the Anglo-American IR should not be taken at their face value in the study of the CEE challenges. Instead, they should be revised, enriched or replaced according to the political realities which they are supposed to study and according to the intellectual traditions of the CEE thought. Not only would this move produce a research which is more relevant to the practical needs of the CEE, but it would be also likely to lead to conceptual innovations at the level of the international discipline.

The current CEE scholarship fails in both respects. Three groups of scholars can be distinguished here – modernisers, traditionalists and sherpas. Modernisers are socialised into the Anglo-American IR but they ignore or deny their CEE embeddedness. They do work and write in English but due to the above weaknesses they do not have much to offer to the outside world and, what is more, the work could be done by someone in the West and by higher standards. Modernisers usually represent the CEE at the international conferences and in international publications. On the

⁵ P. Drulák, *Central Europe and IR Thinking: Traditions and Disciplines*, in: *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe*, [in:] Z. Šabič, P. Drulák (eds), Basingstoke 2012, p. 18-39.

other hand, traditionalists do not produce in English. They are immersed in the CEE context, some of them develop idiosyncratic conceptual tools but most of them are not much aware of concepts and methods, therefore, they produce either a descriptive research or an advocacy research defending particular political positions. They usually occupy important institutional positions in their respective national academic fields. Finally, sherpas are to a limited extent aware of the international IR as well as of the local context. However, they do not develop research of their own, instead, they use their local knowledge to deliver data to research projects led by established international scholars. PhD students and young researchers can benefit from starting as sherpas and thus learning important research skills, however, there are quite a few senior scholars in the CEE who remain in this role for the rest of their career.

Table 2.

The groups of IR scholars

Reflecting the CEE embeddedness?	Reflecting the Anglo-American IR?		
		No	Yes
	No	Sherpas	Modernisers
	Yes	Traditionalists	<i>Reformers?</i>

Source: own work.

To further advance the discipline, reformers are needed, namely, the scholars who are aware of the tools and standards of the Anglo-American IR while they also reflect on the CEE traditions and political realities.

Learning without aping should be the reformist motto. Learning the tools and the standards without aping the features that are not relevant. For example, it does not make much sense to try to refer to the dichotomy between positivism and post-positivism to structure the IR fields in the CEE. The choice between the two may be important at the level of an individual research strategy but it is irrelevant for the discussion about the shape of the disciplines. These have been shaped by the dichotomy between modernisers and traditionalists. It is by learning without aping that the CEE disciplines of IR can produce original research contributions and overcome their major weakness so far.