



**Klaus Nellen**

## Editorial: Cultural Magazines in the New Europe

There exists already a whole host of cultural magazines whose titles alone denote a programmatic cross-border approach: *Lettre International*, *Merkur – Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, *Kafka – Zeitschrift für Mitteleuropa*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *eurozine*. *Transit*, with its subtitle *Europäische Revue*, can also be counted among these.

How are we to understand the European stance set by *Transit*, what idea lies behind it? In the mid-80's, the founders dreamt of a magazine which would serve as a reminder that the division of Europe decided in Yalta was an artificial one and that "the East" never ceased being a part of Europe, and to act accordingly. It took some time to find a publisher whom we could convince with the idea: finally we found "Neue Kritik" in Frankfurt.

The first issue of *Transit* was published immediately after the changes of 1989. In some ways this was *kismet*, sheer luck, since here reality came to support the idea with all its might – which came as much as a surprise to us as it did to everybody else. In 1989, practically overnight, that line, hitherto apparently unmoveable, had disappeared. One massive obstacle seemed to have been removed, there was nothing left to stand in the way of the free exchange of ideas between East and West.

However, the intellectual and cultural reunification of the old continent turned out not to be quite that simple. It seems we will still have to wait a while for our longed-for Europe of Ideas. Until this day, there rules a mighty asymmetry: The "Eastern" Europeans are still more interested in what happens in the "West" than the "Westerners" are in the "East".

*Transit* has set as its goal to use its limited power to help correct this asymmetry. The journal addresses questions of politics, culture and society whilst programmatically including Eastern European authors and perspectives.

The asymmetry in perception between East and West is accompanied by similar political and ideological asymmetries. The phrase "European Enlargement to the East" in itself may be the best illustration of this point. It may be geographically correct, but nevertheless sponsors the image of the disadvantaged peoples of the East having the West's blessings graciously bestowed upon them. However, European Enlargement is no mere enlargement with a bigger EU at the end of it, but rather the process of constructing Europe anew – and therein lies the challenge and the opportunity. We need to re-think our image of Europe and to find a new way of thinking "Europe".

This new dimension that the European project gained in 1989 has time and again been a central theme for *Transit*, most recently so in its issue No. 21:

*Western Enlargement – On Europe's symbolic geography.* The texts address in particular the re–definition of Eastern Europe in the altered relationship between the EU and Russia. I will here comment only on one aspect of this issue. The new members of the EU will have something to offer to the community, they will not be just a burden. There certainly will be tensions between the economic, social and political cultures of the old and the new countries, the "centre" and the "periphery", but simultaneously, there will occur processes of exchange during which both sides will be altered and, one hopes, will be enriched.

Well, there is then some arrogance towards the "new ones", so graciously to be accepted into the club. Such arrogance is multiplied once again towards those who are still waiting on the threshold outside of the hallowed doors.

This brings us to another aspect of European Enlargement – the high price it demands. During the process of Enlargement and Integration in the EU, its mechanisms for exclusion are sharpened. Take for example the Polish–Ukrainian border: Only just has it been opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and already Poland is preparing to close it again from the other side under pressure from Brussels. On both sides, a flourishing borderland culture will be destroyed, productive transnational "leakage currents" (Karl Schlögel) will be disrupted, the Ukraine will have the door to Europe slammed shut in front of its nose. All these effects, however, are presented as a necessary sacrifice in the name of prosperity and security of the enlarged European Union – if at all they are perceived as problems in need of justification. One thing this certainly does not do is to fulfil the European spirit.

In some ways Central Europe has now moved towards the East. The idea of Central Europe (*Mittleuropa*) was incredibly successful. However, it was less successful in its incarnation of Central Europe as the better Europe, the last bastion of "true European culture" between supermarket and gulag. Rather, it served as a political tool for the subversion of block borders old and new. The American historian Tim Snyder wrote about the structural continuity of the Central European idea and the "new Central Europeans" in *Transit 21*:

"Vilnius, Minsk, and Kiev dream of Central Europe, much as Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague did before them. The fact that everyone now thinks that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are actually in Central Europe does not mean that the old dream of Central Europe has been realised. It does mean, however, that visions of change no longer go by the name of "Central Europe" in Warsaw, Budapest, or Prague. As a dream of Central Europe gave way to a reality of the same name, the dream has found a new homeland. The draft of one door slamming shut pushed open another, and Vilnius, Minsk, and Kiev have taken up the vacant rooms in the Hotel Mitteleuropa. (...)

The European Union wields great power in Eastern Europe, and enjoys tremendous popularity in Kiev, Minsk and Moscow. As it admits Poland and then Lithuania, the EU should consider how it could consolidate a new Central Europe in Ukraine, Belarus, and even Russia. If Brussels' Central Europe is the only Central Europe to be had, perhaps Brussels should help to keep that Central Europe as large as possible."

So what are the tasks of cultural journals – this tiny orchestra compared to the mass media – in the European context?

I do not believe that the mission of cultural journals is to contribute to the establishment of a European cultural identity – there are others in charge of that. Identity is the least of our problems, there are enough powers and organs to take care of it, from European integration to globalisation – frequently at the price of dwindling cultural differences.

Europe lives off its differences, its diversity. If the European culture does have a specific identity, then this identity lies maybe paradoxically precisely in the ability to accept differences, to preserve them, to cope with them. With that in mind, cultural journals should be speakers for the differences, not for the identity. Their task is to "plead for the dissimilar" – a phrase taken from issue 4(2001) of the magazine *Kafka*. This is less a question of making an issue of the differences, and more one of bringing them to the fore, to give voice to views that would otherwise drown in the static of the mainstream media.

This plea for a critical accompaniment of the European process of Enlargement and Integration should not be understood as Euroscepticism. The future of Europe seems to be dependent on this process and its successful conclusion. One can, however, currently witness a disheartening boom of populist forces in Central Europe, with allies from Munich to Rome. These forces instrumentalise the difficulties of integration and seem to be prepared to call the European Union into question. The Parisian political scientist Jacques Rupnik will address this "other Central Europe" in *Transit* 23. His plea is a defence of the similarities – the common project Europe – in the face of the return of nationalistic particularities.

One might marvel that the Eastern Europeans still want to join the EU after all the delays. If Enlargement doesn't happen soon, this attitude may change pretty quickly. Then the other Central Europe would have won.

*This text is based on a statement for the debate "Cultural Magazines – Mirror of Europe?" (participants: the Hungarian Lettre International, Kafka, Merkur, eurozine and Transit), which took place in April 2002 in the framework of the "Forum New Europe" at the Leipzig Bookfair and was organised by the Buchmesse-Akademie.*

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