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“Střední Evropa” against “Mitteleuropa”: The Central European Idea and Move- ment in Interwar Czechoslovakia (1918– 1938)

This paper examines the idea of Central Europe in interwar Czechoslovakia, focusing on the role of economic elites and transnational organizations in redefining the regional order after the collapse of Austria-Hungary. By mapping the social composition of these organizations and analyzing their debates, it shows how Czechoslovak economic elites conceptualized Central Europe both as a regional response to post-Habsburg economic fragmentation – particularly among industrialists seeking to regain pre-war export opportunities – and as a strategy to counter German economic predominance in the region. At the same time, Central European cooperation was often conceived as a first step toward broader Pan-European economic integration.

Although “Central Europe” (Mitteleuropa) had been discredited during the First World War as a German imperialistic project, Czechoslovak political and economic actors revived the term “Central Europe” (Střední Evropa) in the 1920s and 1930s to promote regional economic cooperation among the Successor States, explicitly excluding Germany. This semantic and political reappropriation raises important questions about the post-Habsburg reconfiguration of Central Europe and the geopolitical challenges of the interwar period in Europe.

Building on my doctoral research on the Hungarian political economist Elemér Hantos (1880–1942), one of the most prominent advocates of Central European economic cooperation in the interwar period, the paper situates Czechoslovak economic elites at the centre of overlapping Central European and Pan-European networks. Hantos maintained close ties with leading Czechoslovak figures such as former Trade ministers Václav Schuster and

Rudolf Hotowetz – both founding members of the Czechoslovak Committee for Central European Economic Cooperation in Prague – and collaborated with the Czechoslovak sections of the Paneuropean Union and the European Customs Union, as well as with the Central European Institute in Brno.

The paper draws on diplomatic archives consulted in Prague, the archives of the League of Nations and the Paneuropean Union, and digitized German-language Czech, Austrian and Hungarian press sources. It engages with three historiographical traditions that have so far developed largely in parallel: Economic History, International History and European Integration History.

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