Comparative Literature and World Literature in East-Central Europe: An Introduction

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Abstract: This is the introduction to the special issue Comparative Literature and World Literature in East-Central Europe. The special issue invited contributors to examine the cultural, political, and literary implications of discourses on regional identity with particular attention to their historical and institutional embeddedness.

Keywords: Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Comparative Literature, World Literature, Literary Studies

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The history of East-Central Europe is rarely told as a success story. Rather, it is marked by successive political ruptures, imperial reconfigurations, and abrupt changes of sovereignty that have repeatedly reshaped social hierarchies, cultural institutions, and the conditions of literary production. From the perspective of literary history, the region appears less as a coherent cultural unit than as a space of overlapping temporalities, uneven developments, and contested symbolic geographies.[1] Yet it is precisely this lack of continuity, this experience of historical acceleration and interruption, that renders East/Central Europe a particularly productive site for rethinking comparative literature and world literature today.[2] While the present double issue focuses on a specific region, its methodological ambition reaches beyond regional literary studies. By investigating smaller-scale literary and cultural circulations—internal exchanges within East/Central Europe and the region's external relations with the wider world—we aim to complicate global models of world literature that describe transnational connections primarily as flows between a universal world system and individual national cultures. A regional perspective foregrounds instead the mediating role of historical conjunctures and institutions, revealing how literary value, circulation, and visibility are produced unevenly over time. The very terms "Central Europe" and "Eastern Europe" are themselves historical constructs, saturated with political and cultural meanings.[3] Far from neutral geographical designations, they have functioned as symbolic markers in struggles over cultural capital, modernity, and belonging. The emergence of concepts such as "Central Europe," "East-Central Europe,"

1. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004); Irene Kacandes and Yuliya Komska, eds, *Eastern Europe Unmapped: Beyond Borders and Peripheries* (Berghahn Books, 2020).

2. Galin Tihanov et al., *World Literature in the Soviet Union: Studies in Comparative Literature and Intellectual History* (Academic Studies Press, 2023); Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); James Fowkes and Michaela Hailbronner, "Decolonizing Easten Europe: A Global Perspective on 1989 and the World It Made," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 17, no. 2 (2019): 497–509; Theo D'haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics* (De Gruyter Brill, 2021).

3. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 1994); Endre Bojtar, "Eastern or Central Europe?," *Cross Currents*, 1988, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ANW0935.1988.001.

"South-Eastern Europe," or "Eastern Europe" reflects attempts to articulate identities that exceed national frameworks while resisting homogenizing geopolitical classifications.[4] These terms have never been stable: their meanings have shifted with changing historical contexts, from imperial configurations through the Cold War to the post-1989 period.

The theoretical elaboration of regional cultural identities began around the turn of the twentieth century and gained particular visibility during the late socialist period through the writings of dissidents and émigré intellectuals such as Milan Kundera, György Konrád, or Czesław Miłosz. Read widely in Western Europe and North America, these texts framed Central Europe as a cultural space defined by historical memory, irony, and a shared experience of being "kidnapped" by history.[5] Yet these formulations were themselves embedded in specific institutional and geopolitical conditions: exile publishing networks, Western journals, and Cold War regimes of reception. Any critical engagement with regional identity must therefore address not only ideas but also the institutions through which those ideas circulated.

These special issues invited contributors to examine the cultural, political, and literary implications of discourses on regional identity with particular attention to their historical and institutional embeddedness. We encouraged reflection on the inclusions and exclusions produced by competing geographical terms, on the inter-imperial situation of the region, and on the rival symbolic frameworks—Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Habsburg Empire, the Balkans, the Baltic—that have structured literary self-understanding. Such reflection requires situating theoretical concepts within the concrete historical circumstances of their emergence.[6] To theorize Central/Eastern Europe in literary studies necessarily entails examining how literature itself, as well as the discipline of literary studies, has been imagined and institutionalized in the region. Universities, academies, journals, learned societies, and later international organizations provided the material frameworks within which comparative approaches could develop (see Z. Varga and Hajdu's article on the International Comparative Literature Association). These institutions were repeatedly disrupted or reconfigured by historical events: the collapse of empires, the redrawing of borders after the First World War, the imposition of socialist cultural policies after the Second World War, and the transformations following 1989. We also seek to historicize the emergence of comparative literary studies in the region itself. Comparative literature emerged in East/Central Europe not merely as an imported methodology but as a response to concrete historical conditions.[7] Multilingualism, overlapping literary traditions, and ethnically mixed populations made strictly national literary histories insufficient. Scholars working in these contexts were compelled to translate social and political conflicts into humanistic categories, often under conditions of censorship or ideological pressure. The resulting intellectual traditions developed unevenly, shaped by local institutional opportunities and constraints. Some were in dialogue with the French school of comparative literature before the Second World War, others with postwar American comparatism or with Russian literary theory. The outcome was an "uneven and combined development" of comparative literary studies across the region, characterized by both competition and exchange.

The following four approaches were designed to move us towards these stated goals, highlighting possible ways forward in the conceptualization of world literary studies in the region.

1. Theorizing Central, East-Central, and East-Southern Europe in Literary Studies and Intellectual History

The history of Central, East-Central, and East-Southern Europe is marked by discontinuity rather than linear

4. Laszlo Kontler, "Introduction: Reflections on Symbolic Geography," *European Review of History* 6, no. 1 (1999): 9; Marko Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, vol. 1 (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019); Jessie Labov, *Transatlantic Central Europe: Contesting Geography and Redifining Culture Beyond the Nation* (Central European University Press, 2019).

5. Carl Tighe, "Kundera's Kidnap Revisited," *Journal of European Studies* 44, no. 2 (2014): 112–33.

6. Vladimir Biti, *Post-Imperial Literature: Translatio Imperii in Kafka and Coetzee* (De Gruyter, 2021); James Mark et al., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, 1 online resource (Indiana University Press, Office of Scholarly Publishing, Herman B Wells Library, 2020).

7. David Damrosch, "Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies," *Comparative Critical Studies* 3, no. 1–2 (2006): 99–112; Levente T. Szabó, "À La Recherche… de l'editeur Perdu. Brassai Sámuel and the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies," in *Storia, Identità e Canoni Letterari*, ed. Angela Tarantino et al. (Firenze University Press, 2013); Zabel, Blaž, and Blaž Gselman, *Histories of Comparative Literature in Central Europe* (V&R Unipress/Brill, 2026). The case of the first international comparative literature journal, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877–1888), established and run in the multilingual and multiethnic Transylvania (Kolozsvár/Cluj/Klausenburg) became a paradigm for world literature studies already in the first decade of the new millennium thanks to its ideal of decentralization, its international network-based editorial policy, and its focus on linguistic and ethnic minority literature. A more comprehensive and balanced introduction to the way the journal conceived and practiced comparative literature in its historical, cultural and political context is offered by the Revista Transylvania's last year's quadruple issue (2025/4, 2025/5, 2025/6-7) edited by Anca Parvulescu, Alex Goldiș and Levente T. Szabó. The insightful contextual readings in the issues dedicated to the first international comparative literature journal reveal the complex, sometimes even contradictory positions adopted by the ACLU concerning its scholarly commitment to nationalism and anti-nationalism, capitalism and anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. See Anca Parvulescu, Alex Goldiș, and Levente T. Szabó, "Introduction: Acta Comparationis—An Alternative Genealogy of World Comparatism," *Transilvania* 4 (2025): 1–10; Alex Goldiș, "Meltzl and World Literature Studies: A Case of Mirrored Colonialism," *Transilvania* 4 (2025): 31–41; Levente T. Szabó, "Editor's Note: Programmatic Texts of Emerging Comparative Literature in the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies," *Transilvania*, no. 6–7 (2025): 49–95; Levente T. Szabó, "Editor's Note: Selected Programmatic Translation Projects from the Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum," *Transilvania*, no. 6–7 (2025): 96–109.

development. Successive imperial frameworks, abrupt border changes, and shifting regimes of sovereignty have produced a region whose cultural and intellectual formations are inseparable from historical rupture. In literary studies, this has generated a persistent need to conceptualize the region not as a stable geographical entity but as a historically contingent and symbolically charged space. Terms such as "Central Europe," "Eastern Europe," and "East-Central Europe" have functioned less as neutral descriptors than as theoretical interventions, emerging at specific moments in intellectual history and responding to changing geopolitical pressures.

From the late nineteenth century onward, regional concepts were mobilized to articulate positions within Europe's internal hierarchies of culture and modernity. Intellectuals and writers repeatedly sought to resist both cultural marginalization and homogenizing universalism by invoking shared historical experience, multilingual coexistence, and the memory of empire. These efforts intensified during periods of political upheaval, notably after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, during the Cold War, and following 1989. In each case, regional theorization served as a means of negotiating belonging, difference, and asymmetry within broader European and global frameworks. Essays in these issues return to these moments of conceptual crystallization, revisiting both the promises and the exclusions embedded in regional self-descriptions. A case in point is **Kaitlyn Sorenson's** article on the reassessment of Central Europe's discursive legacy. In it, Sorenson persuasively refuses Kundera's notion of Central Europe as the bulwark of Western civilization (as opposed to the uncivilized Balkans). Equally so, she then refutes Nobel prize winner Peter Handke's questionable critique of Kundera. Finally, in a rather "deconstructionist" fashion, she proposes another Nobel prize winner, Olga Tokarczuk's approach to the question, namely, ridding the notion of any ("messianic") substantialist values, and thus freeing it from the Manichaean content imposed upon it by Kundera.

In literary studies, the regional perspective has provided a critical alternative to methodological nationalism as well as to abstract models of world literature that privilege large languages and dominant cultural centers. By foregrounding historical conjunctures and symbolic geographies, regional approaches make visible forms of cultural mediation that remain obscured in global or purely national narratives. The theoretical vocabulary developed around Central and East-Central Europe—memory, belatedness, uneven development, inter-imperial positionality—thus constitutes not merely a descriptive toolkit but a contribution to comparative literary theory itself, a point underscored by contributions that critically reassess the long afterlife of influential regional imaginaries.

In his contribution to the issue, **Daniel Pratt** outlines a reconstruction of the Central European intellectual space by way of tracing the divergent streams of philosophical thought across the region. The article argues that the educated classes' usage of the German language was the integrating force among the various ethnic groups. More specifically, Germanophone philosophical discourse was defining in shaping Central Europe as an intellectual space. Consequently, Pratt refers to it as a substrate for cultural discourse in the region. Thus, the article successfully challenges the idea of concentrated knowledge production, mapping out what is a decentred structure of exchanges and influences.

2. Figures, Institutions, and Traditions in Central and Eastern European Literary Studies and Comparative Literature

Concepts of region and comparison did not emerge in abstraction but were shaped by concrete intellectual biographies and institutional settings. Universities, academies, journals, learned societies, and international organizations provided the frameworks within which comparative and transnational approaches to literature could develop. In Central and Eastern Europe, these institutions were repeatedly disrupted and reconfigured by political change, resulting in uneven patterns of disciplinary formation. The emergence of comparative literature in the region was closely linked to multilingual environments, mixed populations, and overlapping literary traditions. Scholars were often compelled to work across linguistic and cultural boundaries not as a theoretical choice but as a practical necessity. Several contributions in this issue examine emblematic figures of this process, from interwar scholars who helped institutionalize comparative literature internationally to writers who combined scholarly ambition with synthetic visions of world literature.

In his article on the comparatism of János Hankiss, **Tamás Scheibner** has addressed some of the central antagonisms intrinsic to the epistemological endeavour of Hankiss. The Hungarian comparatist conceived of the discipline of comparative literature as a means of mediation between disparate (national) cultures, a vantage point that had guided all his scholarship. Consequently, he ended up arguing for comparative literature's universalist claims against the backdrop of conservative politics. Culturally and territorially unified Hungary can serve, according to Hankiss, as the best mediator between cultures in Central Europe, thus bridging the gap between nationalist resentment on the one hand and universalist unity of literature on the other.

Similarly, focusing on the Hungarian interwar cultural field, **József Havasréti** has provided a critical assessment of Antal Szerb's early account of world literature. His 1941 monograph, The History of World Literature, had preceded the proliferation of world literature conceptualizations for approximately half a century. However, as Havasréti has reminded us, Szerb's account would be more accurately referred to as a history of European literature, as he only focused, with a few Arabic and Persian exceptions, on the "great works of the Western canon". The latter is

precisely where Szerb saw a humanistic ideal in his conception of literature as a means of cultivating humankind.

Blaž Gselman traces both the origins of Slovenian literary studies as well as one of the key moments in the development of literary theory, namely, the role of Roman Jakobson's linguistic research within the Prague linguistic circle. Both events are examined as the two moments in the intellectual history of Central Europe. Likewise, both are conceived of against the backdrop of the academic career of Slavic philologist Matija Murko. Ultimately, by charting Murko's academic relations with the Slavists in Ljubljana on the one hand, and with his colleagues in Prague on the other, the article is another attempt to reconstruct Central European intellectual space as a result of complex, and often antagonistic, socio-historical relations.

These case studies illuminate how comparative literature functioned simultaneously as scholarship, cultural mediation, and, at times, cultural diplomacy. **Antoni Martí Monterde** demonstrates this by exploring the early days of compraative literature, especially its institutionalisation through university programmes, professional associations, and academic journals. By showing how instrumental the Hungarian comparatist János Hankiss was to the institutionalisation and recognition of the new discipline (traditionally credited to French scholars such as Fernand Baldensperger or Paul van Tieghem) he paints a more diverse history of the field, one that had many capitals, among them Budapest. As Monterde demonstrates, one of Hankiss's most lasting legacies was the founding of the academic journal *Helicon*. Journals and periodicals always played a particularly significant role as sites of intellectual exchange and institutional continuity. They served as platforms for negotiating literary modernity, national identity, and regional belonging, often under conditions of censorship or ideological pressure. Analyses of journal cultures and disciplinary infrastructures in this volume show how institutions shaped not only what was written and studied, but also how literary modernity itself was imagined from the region. The institutional history of comparative literature thus emerges as a field marked by political ambiguity, international aspiration, and recurrent efforts to reconcile universalist claims with historically situated perspectives.

Hungarian periodical culture and symbolic self-positioning are examined by **Orsolya Rákai**, who adopts an innovative approach to the study of literary journals and magazines, their ideological implications, and their broader social context. By discussing the ideological implications underpinning the titles of Hungarian journals *Nyugat*, *Napkelet*, and *Kelet Népe*, as well as their post-World War II (or, more precisely, post-Trianon) successors such as *Magyar Csillag*, *Újhold*, and *Csillag*, she proposes a novel approach that reveals how literary journals respond, directly or implicitly, to social, cultural, and political change.

Zoltán Z. Varga and **Péter Hajdu**'s paper showcases a chapter from the institutional history of comparative literature in East/Central Europe during the Cold War period. Their paper is based on research in the Institute for Literary Studies archive which contains precious documents from the period when István Sőtér, the director of the institute, served as president of the ICLA for a three-year term from 1970 to 1973. Z. Varga and Hajdu analyze, on the one hand, how the Hungarian Comparative Literature Association was founded in 1971 amid institutional and ideological power games within the national and international scholarly scene. In their second case-study they follow and interpret the so-called "Bordeaux censorship affair" from the same period, when Sőtér attempted to remove three papers that criticized Eastern European totalitarian regimes from the proceedings of the 1970 Bordeaux Congress of ICLA.

3. Elements of a Cultural Poetics of the Contemporary East/Central European Novel: Regional Literature and its Chronotopoi

Beyond disciplinary history, the regional perspective raises the question of whether shared historical conditions have generated identifiable poetic and narrative patterns in contemporary East/Central European literature. Rather than positing a unified regional canon, this approach seeks to trace recurrent motifs, genres, and chronotopoi that emerge in response to comparable historical pressures.

One such element is the persistent engagement with the past through fragmented, ironic, or self-reflexive forms of narration. Traumatic historical experiences—wars, occupations, forced migrations, state socialism—often appear indirectly, mediated through memory, family history, or spatial dislocation. Several articles in this issue address how twentieth-century and contemporary prose reworks these historical sediments, staging encounters between personal and collective temporalities that produce chronotopes marked by belatedness, repetition, and suspended transition. One such example is **Michael Lackey**'s article, in which he seeks to reinterpret Vladimir Bartol's much-discussed 1938 novel *Alamut* along the lines of the literary genre of (political) biofiction. His analysis of the novel reconstructs the missing link between the Nazis and Christian Nationalism, so often obfuscated in literature. Lackey has provided a meticulous close-reading of (simultaneously) *Alamut*, the relationship between Nazism and Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular, and the history of 11th-century Iran, juxtaposing paragraphs from *Alamut* and those of Hitler's speeches to unveil the proximity of Bartol's fictional character Sabbah and the Nazi ruler.

Another recurring feature is the oscillation between national specificity and transnational circulation. While many texts remain deeply embedded in local histories and languages, they simultaneously reflect an acute awareness of global literary markets and asymmetrical regimes of visibility. Contributions engaging with post-multinational writing and with historically inflected narrative strategies demonstrate how genres such as autofiction, historiographic

metafiction, and the postmodern historical novel have proven particularly apt for negotiating these tensions, most explicitly in analyses of post-multinational authorship and world-literary asymmetry. In this sense, the cultural poetics of the contemporary East/Central European novel emerges from the interplay between historical memory, spatial reconfiguration, and the pressures of world-literary circulation. **Vladimir Biti** shows this clearly in his article on the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić. His analysis of her writing reveals that literary transnationalism, which emerged on the back of Western national literary traditions, rests on a hegemonic discourse that dispels the "bad" nationalism by ascribing it to its other. World literature thus manages to world some authors, but it does so by unworlding the rest, preventing "the nationally indifferent writers of small literatures who refuse to accept national labels" from entering it.

4. Material Traces: Material Culture, Hybrid Form, and Digital Approaches to Regional Literary History

Another way of approaching the literary spaces, production, and institutions of Central, East-Central, and East-Southern Europe is through the material traces left by artistic, literary, and intellectual activity. This is one of the central concerns of **Zsófia Kalavszky**'s article on literary cults in East/Central Europe, in which she examines their genesis, influence, and material manifestations. Focusing on the cultic reception of three influential authors from the region—Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Sándor Petőfi, and Aleksandr Pushkin—she shows that their emergence and afterlife differ substantially from those in Western Europe. She identifies a number of regional features, including a strong emphasis on lamentation as a literary form, as well as the importance of obituaries and literary and urban anecdotes. Her study therefore reveals the strong potential of material culture for regionally attentive literary studies.

György Túry and **Jessie Labov** examine literary journalism in East-Central Europe as a hybrid narrative form grounded in encounters with material reality. Focusing on reportage from the Balkans route and the Polish–Belarusian border, they argue that long-format journalism derives its force not simply from factual accuracy but from its capacity to transform fragmented, mediated events into experiential narratives. Through close readings of works by Emma Jane Kirby, Sándor Jászberényi, Mikołaj Grynberg, and Bartłomiej Sabela, the article shows how techniques such as montage, testimonial embedding, and focalization re-anchor abstract political discourse in embodied, situated experience. In doing so, literary journalism produces "narrative knowledge" that confronts readers with the material conditions of migration—violence, vulnerability, and human interaction—often obscured by state-sponsored narratives simply demonizing migrants. The article demonstrates how engagement with material traces—voices, bodies, landscapes, and documentary fragments—gives literary journalism its distinctive critical and affective charge.

Recent developments in digital humanities also offer new possibilities for examining regional literary dynamics beyond close reading and canonical narratives. Large-scale digitization, multilingual databases, and computational methods enable the tracing of literary memory, circulation, and visibility across linguistic and national boundaries. These approaches foreground material traces—metadata, publication networks, translation flows, and institutional affiliations—that complement traditional interpretive methods.

Quantitative analyses of digital platforms such as Wikipedia and Wikidata, discussed in this issue as exploratory case studies by **Kata Dobás and Botond Szemes**, reveal how literary traditions remember one another in the present. Such data-driven perspectives make visible asymmetries within the region, including differences in cultural centrality, gender representation, and temporal focus. They also highlight the role of language as a determinant of accessibility and circulation, particularly in regions characterized by linguistic diversity.

By integrating quantitative methods with historically informed interpretation, digital humanities research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of regional literary systems. Rather than replacing established approaches, these methods extend the comparative project by mapping patterns of connection and exclusion at scales previously inaccessible. In doing so, they reaffirm the importance of regional perspectives as a bridge between close textual analysis, institutional history, and global models of literary circulation.

The present mini-cluster of *Revista Transilvania* gathers contributions that experiment with these perspectives. They do not aim to exhaust the possible approaches to East/Central European literature as world literature. Rather, they propose an open, historically grounded, and institutionally informed framework within which regional literary phenomena can be rethought. By foregrounding history and institutions, this issue seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in comparative literature and world literature while remaining attentive to the specific conditions that have shaped literary life in East/Central Europe.

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