GLOBALIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

There are more nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe now than ever before. The most recent stage of state formation since the fall of communism ironically coincided with the emergence of an increasing sense of uncertainty in Western Europe about the very idea of the sovereign nation-state. The European Union’s (EU) efforts toward political integration underlined the eroding effect of economic globalization on state powers. As the various supranational economic and political institutions unfold (the World Trade Organization [WTO], the EU, NATO, UN, and so on), the Central and East European states are forced into confronting a major paradox: they must consolidate their powers and independence, while adjusting to pan-European and global trends that transcend sovereignty. The role of the state has thus been radically redefined in the past few decades. In tandem with this process of domestic redefinition, the states’ relations to one another have also altered fundamentally in this increasingly interdependent environment. These foci—domestic and international politics in Central and Eastern Europe amidst the waves of globalization—are the main themes of essays in this special issue of Canadian American Slavic Studies (CASS).

This issue of CASS devotes special attention to the changing nature of the interaction between the structures and institutions of both domestic and international politics in Central and Eastern Europe. The purpose of this collection of essays is to discuss how European integration, NATO membership, and the broad processes of globalization have affected the region’s politics.

Globalization is surely one of the most charged political battlegrounds of our age. Its advocates say it is an engine for universal prosperity, while its critics see it as a race to the bottom for the poor. Much current work on Central and Eastern Europe points out superficial democratization, economic polarization, and cultural homogenization as the main effects of integration into the European and global political, economic, and cultural frameworks. This CASS special issue debates these nearly exclusively pessimistic arguments. The essays presented here contend that both gains and losses occur in the in-
teraction of the most specific, local issues with the broadest and most diffuse global (educational, legal, institutional) forces. While most of the authors in this collection focus on one case study country, all of them advantageously go beyond a single domestic framework. As a result of the contributors' disciplinary diversity, the essays incorporate both conventional political and economic institutions (e.g., parliaments and government bureaucracies) and unconventional agents of political change (e.g., social movements, economic exchange, gender roles) in their analyses.

The Central and East European states have experienced significant changes in recent history – in the borders within which they act, and in their external relations with one another, as well as with Europe and the rest of the world. The bipolar Europe of the Cold War era (1948-1989), when the continent was divided clearly and unequivocally, is now a memory. After 1989, the division between East and West entered a process of redefinition that is now transforming the continent from a political monochrome to a broader spectrum of colors in a finely variegated spatial geography. This new set of “colors” in international relationships includes many nascent types of connections but it also maintains reflections of, and reactions to, the recent past (the Cold War era) and to the periods well before.

The Cold War era presents a tempting simplicity in international relations, especially in contrast to the much greater ambiguity of contemporary political and economic alliances. However, it is important for us to remember that the upheavals of political change make the exclusively monochrome colors of East and West a gross simplification, even during the Cold War era. Some of the many examples of ambiguity in the height of the Cold War include: the Soviet withdrawal from Austria in 1955, the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict between 1948 and 1953, and the revolts and revolutions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, all during the Soviet military presence. While recognizing that the spheres of influence were contested even in Europe between 1948 and 1989, it is impossible not to recognize that the collapse of the Soviet system allowed for a much denser, and consequently much more ambiguous, type of relationship than merely friends and foes to develop between the two parts of Europe.

After 1989, instead of the two respective blocks in Eastern and Western Europe, the name and, more importantly, the concept of an old-new region were resuscitated under the name of Central Europe. The dusting off of the term “Central Europe” (or, in German, Mitteleuropa) gave a new but familiar meaning to bridging the differences between East and West, and replaced the previously clear division of Europe. From a two-fold bifurcation, a three-fold division emerged. Central Europe provides a connective tissue between the ruptured political and economic development paths of the European continent. However, its borders and the meaning of Central Europe are still un-