



## International business *with* Central and Eastern Europe: From tyranny of history to revisited laboratories of learning



### 1. Introduction

“People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing.”

(Roth, 1997, p. 4)

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have provided “a fascinating research laboratory in which to assess the explanatory and predictive power of different theories” (Meyer & Peng, 2005, p. 600). This has had an important impact on the development of the international business (IB) literature (Cantwell, 2016; Gelbuda, Meyer, & Delios, 2008). As an ideological Iron Curtain descended on the region after WWII, the “unique societal quasi-experiments” (Meyer & Peng, 2005, p. 600) created a lasting historical, socio-cultural and political legacy, which has shaped idiosyncratic archetypes of embeddedness (Jaklič, Rašković, & Schuh, 2018). Exploring such embeddedness has influenced the evolution of internationalization theory (Buckley, 2014; Meyer, 2001) in terms of both firm strategies (Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011) and the broader firm-environment nexus (Meyer & Peng, 2005; Svejnar, 2002). It continues to shape the evolution of institutional theory development within the IB discipline (see, e.g., Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019) and our understanding of organizational transformation in the general management literature (e.g., Soulsby & Clark, 2007).

The institutional idiosyncrasies and resource constraints, as well as specific ways of economic organisation and managerial approaches provided a rich array of distinct phenomena of firms, consumers and other institutional actors. The phenomenon-driven stream of IB researchers leveraged the exploration of this “context richness” and unique embeddedness to advance institutional theory (Cantwell, 2016). Other research made important theoretical advances also related to organizational transformation within management research (e.g., Dixon, Meyer, & Day, 2010) and on marketing capabilities within marketing (e.g., Fahy et al., 2000). Both “spilled over” significantly into the IB literature. Research on CEE helped to sensitize the use of concepts like “institutions” and “culture” in merging “economic and sociological theories of transaction costs, firm resources, and institutions” within IB research (Peterson, 2016, p. 33). In some ways, the CEE as an entity became instrumental in providing a toolkit for future research on emerging markets within IB and management (Meyer & Peng, 2016); or other transitional markets. This can perhaps be best illustrated with Meyer and Peng (2005) transition from examining the CEE region, towards a wider and more theoretically structured examination of emerging markets (e.g., Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik, & Peng, 2009; Meyer & Peng, 2016).

Thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the countries of CEE are well integrated into the global, or (at least) regional economies, and

have undergone profound changes. The majority of them became European Union (EU) member states, while a handful of the rest in the Western Balkans are at various stages of EU accession. In many ways, the so-called “European integration project” seems to have healed the ideologically-imposed scar which cut across the Old Continent. Yet, this transition has come with multi-level “successes” and “disappointments” in what has been named the “great transformation” of CEE (Kornai, 2008). It has been accompanied by myriad divergent processes taking place across specific countries challenging the uniformity of CEE as a region (Meyer & Peng, 2016). For example, once seen as the most economically developed among the CEE countries, Slovenia seems to have lost its comparative edge due to an all too familiar cocktail of unsuccessful management buyouts and a failure to carry out relevant structural and institutional reforms. This devolution is perhaps most striking when it comes to its downgrade from a strong innovator to a moderate innovator in the latest 2019 European Innovation Scoreboard. Poland, on the other hand, has become an economic powerhouse, being the only country in the CEE region to avoid contraction of its economy during the global economic and financial crisis, which crippled the rest of Europe, especially the CEE region.

Some 40 years ago, and a decade before the fall of the Iron Curtain, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1978) delivered a compelling view on the West-East dichotomy in his critical and candid account of American culture at his 1978 Harvard commencement address (Paloff, 2014). Solzhenitsyn went beyond the idea of an invented Eastern Europe by the Enlightened West. He argued that “the otherness” of CEE (Wolff, 1994) had more to do with self-perception of the West than with geography, which also created a cognitive barrier for managerial decision-making and firm internationalization (Meyer & Gelbuda, 2006). While Meyer and Peng (2005) theoretical probing into CEE underscored the undeniable fact that CEE countries have undergone a distinctive shared historical experience going back to the times of secondary Christianisation in the 10th century A. D. (Müller, 2009), Kundera (1984) argued that CEE countries have been more co-opted by recent history than actively partaking in a common vision of “easterness” and pursuit of supra-national identity. Paloff (2014, p. 689) illustrated this by saying: “The West needed to be concerned with Eastern Europe more as a phenomenon than a fixed geopolitical entity”. It seems that once the (ideological) concern vanished, CEE countries have become co-opted once again; this time into the West.

Four decades after Solzhenitsyn’s address, another Harvard commencement speaker for the class of 2019, the German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel, spoke about her personal experience with “the Wall” in Germany. In her personal account, Chancellor Merkel tried to inspire the new generation of “tomorrow’s leaders” to challenge the seemingly

unalterable constraints; even those “made of stone”. She also urged the class of 2019 not to take for granted the hard-earned freedoms and seven decades of peace in Europe. Her speech resonated powerfully against the changing international landscape and some worrying trends in recent years, like growing anti-globalization sentiment, nationalism and extremism, increasing inequality, erosion of the existing rules-based multilateral world order, and some of the fundamental principles of humanity. It is becoming unfortunately all too apparent, that the ongoing U.S.-China trade war is more than just a political “blip” or a modern day manifestation of the Thucydides trap. It increasingly echoes a revival of [Huntington \(1993\)](#) clash of civilizations grounded in all too familiar notions of “otherness” and identity. As [Solzhenitsyn \(1978\)](#) quite provocatively put to his predominant American audience back in 1978: “the West’s perception of itself is so grossly distorted that it cannot hope to understand the East” ([Paloff, 2014, p. 689](#)). In this context, the relevance of studying identity-based or phenomena-based demarcations of the East might compel us to revisit the CEE region as a set of “learning laboratories” in terms of both the political economy, or insights into the challenges and opportunities of transition processes, critical junctions in institutional development and various types of disintegration and integration (i.e. economic, political, socio-cultural etc.). As the existing rules-based multilateral institutional system appears to be increasingly under threat and various disintegration forces play out ([Witt, 2019](#)), we may need to revisit the lessons learned from CEE countries and their near-past history (e.g., on disintegration, institutional devolution and evolution, changes in identity, the importance of firms’ non-market strategies, drastic changes in consumer behaviour, various types of social changes etc.). As the IB discipline itself “struggles” with its discipline identity and relevance in an increasingly changing world ([Buckley, Doh, & Benischke, 2017](#); [Delios, 2017](#); [Poulis & Poulis, 2018](#)), it is becoming increasingly obvious that many of the previously exogenous variables in IB research in fact need to become endogenized ([Witt, 2019](#)), calling also for an adaptation in ontology ([Poulis & Poulis, 2018](#)). This will require a much more context-sensitive and reflective-type of research and researchers – more cognisant of history, identity, politics, socio-cultural changes, institutional evolution and devolution, as well as various process of socio-economic transformation.

It is for all these reasons that we believe this special issue of IB *with* (not in) CEE is relevant and timely. Not least, because it marks the 30-year anniversary of the great CEE transformation. The six papers selected from a roster of 31 nominated papers by the track chairs at the 2017 annual AIB-CEE chapter conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, have undergone a rigorous multi-stage peer review process overseen by a team of three guest editors from three corners of the world. They are further accompanied by a seventh commissioned bibliometric study, the first of its kind, which provides a bird-eye overview of the evolution of the CEE as an entity within IB research. Together, the seven papers within this special issue show that CEE countries continue to offer a rich context for IB research ([Jaklič et al., 2018](#)). In light of current events, we believe CEE countries need to be revisited by IB scholars and other social scientists, as we transition in our understanding of CEE from an entity marked by a shared tranny of history and a common geography to exploring their roles in an increasingly polarized core-periphery analytical frame of the world economy, which some have discussed in the positive context of so-called benefits at “the margin” ([Ballinger, 2017](#)).

## 2. Key insights from the special issue

The first paper by [Jaklič, Oblój, Svetličič and Kronegger](#) on the evolution of CEE-related IB research has been commissioned by the special issue editors and the JBR editor-in-chief. It is a bibliometric review of papers related to CEE published in the Web of Science (WOS). As the first-in-the-field comprehensive bibliometric analysis on regional IB research, the paper adds to the discussion about the region’s

relevance in IB research. It summarizes existing scholarly contributions (both in terms of authorship and topics) and presents a future research agenda. The study addresses four research questions: How well is CEE (as a region and research territory) represented in the WoS database? How has IB research in the CEE region developed over the past decades? What has been the impact of business research conducted in the CEE region? Which challenges, and opportunities may await CEE research in the future? The authors propose strengthening four (thus far underused) research directions: comparative studies, process research, multilevel (emphasising micro data) and more interdisciplinary (also bibliometric) research. These can help leverage the richness of the CEE context and obtain insights into differences and similarities across CEE (and other emerging markets), alongside studying failure/success determinants of MNEs in CEE.

The second paper by [Trąpczyński, Halaszovich and Piaskowska](#) is on the role of perceived institutional distance in foreign ownership decisions of new Polish MNEs. It draws on a unique database of new Polish MNEs, which are as a leading source of CEE FDI within the region. This paper does not only adopt an institutional angle, for which a lot of the CEE IB research came to be famous in the 1990s and 2000s, but also focuses on managerial perceptions of formal and informal institutional distance. It combines institutional theory and upper echelon theory with the IB tradition of studying managerial perceptions and decisions making; particularly embodied by the works of [Aharoni](#) or [Hymer](#) in the early IB literature. In looking at the impact of formal and informal institutional distance perceptions on managerial decision making in terms of ownership levels, the authors have confirmed that such distance is indeed asymmetric. This asymmetry in turn plays an important role in otherwise negative effects of distance on ownership level and depends on host-home perceived institutional development differences. The paper provides an important contribution to the ongoing discourse on how to think about “distance” in IB research, which has been far from exhausted.

The third paper by [Ciszewska-Mlinarič, Wójcik and Oblój](#) has received the Best paper award at the 2017 annual AIB-CEE chapter conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It explores the learning dynamics of a rapidly internationalizing venture (RIV) from Poland beyond the initial stages of international growth. Analysing a single case study over 25 years across multiple internationalization stages, the authors focus on the process of learning, various learning modes and so-called learning triggers. Their study shows that RIVs in the initial internationalization stage begin to substitute vicarious learning and experiential learning for congenital learning; which is triggered by setbacks and opportunities. In the subsequent adolescent stage, RIVs develop a well-integrated system of vicarious, experiential and search learning, with vicarious learning being the strongest. Key learning triggers at this stage involve market-seeking behaviour and perceived resource-competency gaps. Lastly, in the mature stage, vicarious and congenital learning gives way to grafting and experiential learning, as well as search learning. The shift in learning modes at this stage is triggered mainly by institutional and efficiency challenges. The paper offers important theoretical implications for both traditional Uppsala theory of internationalization, as well as accelerated internationalization of RIVs. Its focus on specific triggers of learning makes it applicable beyond the CEE context, also for developed market firms.

Using a sample of Western European exporting SME’s operating in CEE markets, the fourth paper by [Bodlaj, Kadić-Maglajlić and Vida](#) explores tensions in the literature by unravelling the interrelationships between different innovations types and SME’s export growth. In addition, they also seek to disentangle the boundary effects of financial constraints for innovation and geographic diversification. Novel to this study is the inclusion of non-technological innovations (e.g., marketing and organizational) which has received little attention in the literature, as most existing studies have focused on technological innovations. This empirical study advances both the international business and innovation literature in establishing that the export growth of SME is fostered

by both organizational and technological innovations.

The fifth paper by Latukha, Poór, Mitskevich and Linge focuses on the transfer of human resource management (HRM) practices from foreign firms to subsidiaries in Russia. Analysing a sample of 21 foreign subsidiaries in Russia the paper focuses on the relationships between cultural fit, home-host country institutional development, headquarter-subsidiary management and the type of HRM practice transfer (e.g., exportation, integration, adaptation). Their results show that in terms of cultural fit (using value and practice scores from the GLOBE study), culturally similar countries mostly export their HRM practices, while countries with greater cultural differences need much higher levels of adaptation of their HRM practices. In terms home-host country institutional development differences the authors propose a two-step process, where exportation vs integration of HRM strategies should be first based on the level of cultural fit. According to the authors, adaptation, not integration of HRM practices usually occurs in markets with better developed institutions and well-established HRM and business practices, as opposed to implementing inefficient practices. In terms of HQ-subsidiary relationships, there was no difference in the transfer of HRM practices between M&As and greenfield investment modes when it came to formal establishment modes. This is not the case when it came to informal factors related to knowledge flows. Top-down knowledge flows were typical for firms which exported or integrated their HRM practices, while bottom-up knowledge flows were more typical for firms adapting or integrating their HRM practices. The latter was also more conducive for greater inter-subsidiary knowledge flows. While drawing on the specific Russian country context, this paper is valuable also beyond the CEE region. It shows the importance of exploring HRM practice transfers in the wider context of cultural fit, home-host country institutional development and development of business systems.

The sixth paper by Diamantopoulos, Arslanagić-Kalajdžić and Moshik addresses the question of consumer segmentation in international marketing from the perspective of country-of-origin effects (COO) and product-country image assessment (PCI). Analysing consumer samples from Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authors focus on two specific conditioning variables: need for cognition (NFC) and need for affect (NFA). The authors argue that while both conditioning variables are relevant for understanding PCI assessment, they should be employed as country-specific segmentation variables. They reveal large differences in how COO effects operate in different markets. This paper is the first cross-country study which examines the conditioning roles of NFC and NFA on COO effects, providing an important contribution to an increasingly relevant literature on COO effects and various foreign-domestic product consumer disposition, as well as country attitudes in the international marketing and IB literatures.

The last paper by Rašković, Ding, Hirose, Žabkar and Fam focuses on consumer ethnocentrism (CET) and consumer decision-making styles (CDMS) of young-adult consumers. It explores the level of between- and within-regional differences in CDMS and CET in East Asia and CEE. Drawing on Social identity theory, the authors explore various “constellations” of young-adult consumers with regards to their CDMS and assess to what extent discriminating between various consumer segments based on CET is possible. Comparing four matched student samples from China, Japan, Slovenia and Croatia the study supports the general applicability of the CDMS framework and low ethnocentric tendencies of young-adult consumers at regional, country and individual segment levels. This study addressed the universality of young-adult consumers as an archetypal global consumer segment, particularly appealing to international marketers. While young-adult consumers can be thought of as an archetypal global consumer segment in terms of CET, there are various types of CDMS constellations when it comes to their decision making as consumers. This challenges the assumed standard approach to segmentation of this consumer demographic cohort. Instead, the authors propose a two-stage segmentation

approach for international marketers. Most interestingly, inter-regional CDMS differences were not bigger than country-level differences. The paper provides insights for international marketing (particularly the growing discourse on global-vs-local consumer cultures,) as well as for the culture studies literature within IB.

### 3. Special thanks

We would first wish to thank the Academy of International Business (AIB) and the AIB-CEE chapter executive board for their support in organizing the 4th annual AIB-CEE chapter conference held 27–29 September 2017 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. As one of the youngest AIB chapters, the AIB-CEE chapter has in the few years of its existence managed to attract over a 100 active members which regularly attend annual chapter conferences and other workshop events. A special acknowledgement also goes to the University of Ljubljana, hosting the 2017 AIB-CEE chapter conference, and to its School of Economics and Business, which also financially supported the conference.

In organizing this special issue, we wish to thank the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Business Research*, Professor Naveen Donthu from Georgia State University, as well as acknowledge the fantastic editorial team at the journal. Their support and help have been invaluable throughout the process of creating this issue. We appreciate Naveen's encouragement to commission an overview paper related to the evolution of CEE research. Another person that has been hugely supportive of this special issue has been Dr. Łukasz Puślecki from Poznań University of Economics in Poland, also the founding Chair of the AIB-CEE chapter.

A very big thank you goes also to all of the reviewers involved with this special issue. In total, 53 reviewers supported a rigorous, multi-round peer review process. On average, each paper underwent at least two review rounds and was reviewed by at least three different reviewers. Looking at the geographical background of the reviewers, more than a third (35.7%) of the reviewers came from CEE, 12.5% came from the United States, and 8.9% were from The Netherlands. A full list of reviewers for this special issue can be found in the appendix section of this editorial.

Lastly, we wish to thank the authors. Their hard work, research rigour and original ideas make up the backbone of this special issue. In looking at the authorship structure of the seven accepted papers, we are pleased to see each paper has been co-authored by several authors, who in most cases come from various corners of CEE and beyond. They transcend not just geographical and cultural borders, but also generational divides. In this regard, we are particularly pleased to see a new, younger generation of IB scholars working alongside their more established peers.

### Appendix. JBR AIB-CEE special issue reviewers

We would like to acknowledge the following reviewers of this special issue. In alphabetical order based on surname:

1. Nadia Albu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania
2. Christoph Breidbach, University of Melbourne, Australia
3. Mateja Bodlaj, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
4. Maja Bučar, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
5. Juan Bustamante, ESPAE Graduate School of Management- ESPOL, Ecuador
6. Deborah Y. Cohn, New York Institute of Technology, United States, NY
7. Vítor Corado Simões, ISEG, Portugal
8. Ana Colovic, NEOMA Business School, France
9. Barbara Culiberg, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
10. Tomaž Čater, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
11. Marina Dabić, University of Zagreb/Nottingham Trent University, Croatia/United Kingdom

12. Elena Denisova-Schmidt, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
  13. Desislava Dikova, WU Vienna, Austria
  14. Kim S. Fam, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
  15. Lura Forcum, Clemson University, United States, SC
  16. Hongzhi Gao, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
  17. Huachao Gao, University of Victoria, Canada
  18. Pedro J. J Garcia-Teruel, University of Murcia, Spain
  19. Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, The Netherlands
  20. Angela Gracia B. Cruz, Monash University, Australia
  21. Peder Greve, University of Reading, United Kingdom
  22. Birgit Hagen, University of Pavia, Italy
  23. Louise Heslop, Carleton University, Canada
  24. Andreja Jaklič, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
  25. Djavlonbek Kadirov, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
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  31. Aljaž Kunčič, United Nations, Lebanon
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  33. Patricia P. McDougall-Covin, Indiana University, United States, IN
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  35. Gregor Pfajfar, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
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  38. Lee Quinn, Coventry University, United Kingdom
  39. Matevž Rašković, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
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  41. Zhanna Rodina, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
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  43. Vesna Sedoglavich, Australian National University, Australia
  44. Charlotta Agneta Sirén, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
  45. Nebojša Stojčić, University of Dubrovnik, Croatia
  46. Tim Ströbel, University of Bern, Switzerland
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  48. Piotr Trapczynski, Poznan University of Economics, Poland
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