

REFLECTION

Erhard Busek, Austria's Central European Ambassador, 1941–2022

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ABSTRACT | This reflection surveys the political and academic career of Dr. Erhard Busek, who passed away in March 2022. It focuses on his relationship with Central European dissidents in the 1980s and his contributions toward dialogue and understanding in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. His special relationship with Hungary and Hungarians is prioritized.

KEYWORDS | Austria, Central Europe, dissidents, MDF, Vienna

Erhard Busek, former mayor of Vienna, chairman of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), minister of science, and vice chancellor of Austria, passed away on March 13, 2022. Busek was a passionate—and compassionate—Central European, a politician, an intellectual, and a Catholic humanist.¹ Born in Vienna in 1941, World War II and the carnage it wreaked informed his entire life: it convinced him that peace, stability, and prosperity for all societies in a region often dubbed Europe's periphery could only be obtained and secured through dialogue, empathy, and a sincere appreciation of each other's histories.

Busek cared deeply about Hungary, the “other half” of the former Habsburg Empire, and had a hand in Hungarian history at important junctures. He considered Austria's neutrality during the Cold War a responsibility, not an excuse to stand idly by. During his innumerable travels behind the Iron Curtain, he found many friends across the political spectrum,

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which made him an exception among Austrian politicians and Austrians generally, his friend Karel von Schwarzenberg emphasized.² Early in his career, Busek's unconventional approach to local politics earned him the ambivalent label "*bunter Vogel*" [colorful bird].³ All his life, he was drawn to outsiders and mavericks, those with unusual biographies and those who dared to think outside of the box. Schwarzenberg, the rather eccentric heir to the disenfranchised House of Schwarzenberg, was one such character; Paul Lendvai, the 1956 Hungarian refugee who first became a foreign correspondent for the *Financial Times* and then an influential journalist in Austria, was another.⁴

Although Busek would have rejected the label "cosmopolitan," it seems fitting, as the Alpine Republic proved almost too small for his vision of the region and Austria's role in it. He detested provincialism and parochialism, and easily and often bridged party-political and ideological divides; for instance, he admired the former foreign minister and chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a Social Democrat, whose "*Ostpolitik*" he in a way resumed.⁵ Busek thought of the Habsburg Empire not (simply) as a "*Völkerkerker*" [people's dungeon] but considered its ethnic diversity a strength, not a liability. He proved particularly attuned to the complex relationship between Gentiles and Jews and the many nuances of Central Europe's Jewish histories.⁶

Busek was deeply committed to East, or rather *Central*, European dissidents, despite ideological differences. In the 1980s, he supported the erstwhile leftist members of Hungary's "Democratic Opposition," who would go on to found the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége [SZDSZ]). Explaining his outlook on these collaborations, he noted that "it mattered that people did not feel left alone."⁷ Exposure to Western journalists, Busek knew, guaranteed a modicum of protection for those fighting for democracy, civil liberties, and human rights on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Despite the general apathy in his home country, he used his leverage to get Austrian journalists to cover dissident causes as often as possible. He took reporters on trips through Eastern Europe, especially to Poland after the rise of Solidarność [Solidarity], even after the 1981 declaration of martial law. His friend, Holocaust survivor and Solidarność advisor Władysław Bartoszewski, respectfully and endearingly called him an "*Ostreisender*" [traveler to the East].⁸

Busek was a pragmatist and did not shy away from getting his hands dirty. Hans-Henning Paetzke, György Konrád's German translator, chuckled

at the memory of how Busek, then deputy mayor, helped him haul an old, heavy duplicating machine down from an attic in Vienna that a Maoist cell had once occupied to deliver it to Gábor Demszky and László Rajk, Jr. for the production of *Beszélő*.⁹ In 1983, during a visit to the US, Busek met up with Konrád, who was spending a few months at New York University, to inform him about his selection for the prestigious Herder Prize. The award recognized contributions from “the other Europe” to European culture at large. Busek, of course, had helped secure the selection of Konrád. At the time, the Hungarian writer was the target of a smear campaign in Hungary that had friends worried about his well-being if he returned home. When Konrád did, Busek packed his manuscripts in his car, including the one for *Antipolitics*, and drove them comfortably and unchecked to Budapest, while the Hungarian writer was strip-searched at the border.¹⁰

Busek's involvement with East European dissidents, however, did not endear him to the Austrian establishment, who thought of his meddling as obstructive to Austrian financial and business interests. For example, he co-hosted a speaker series, to which he invited people like Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Leszek Kołakowski, and Konrád to grant them an appropriate forum and engage his fellow Austrians. However, “Mayor Helmut Zilk prohibited the event, because they were not ‘official’ [representatives] and it was against [Poland's and] Hungary's interest[s] and, of course, because he had solid relations with the Communists,” he recalled. Unwilling to give in, Busek moved the event to Café Landmann, and in the end, Busek remarked, “I was grateful for the ban because it brought me a lot of media attention.” He laughed, as he so often did when talking about the absurdities of Austrian politics.¹¹ Busek was also among the very few politicians who opposed the construction of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydraulic dam project, which Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia had signed on to, and helped prevent the development of the Austrian site in Hainburg. A devout Catholic, he believed in humanity's responsibility for nature; the dam, if completed, threatened unique ecosystems along the Danube—the Central European river—a price he was unwilling to pay regardless of the potential gains for the Austrian companies involved.¹²

Economic investments in Central and Eastern Europe, from which countless Austrian companies benefited even before 1989, rang hollow in Busek's ears without the ferment of mutual understanding and exchange. In the mid-1980s, Busek helped Krzysztof Michalski in founding

the Institute for Human Sciences (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen [IWM]): thanks to him, the City of Vienna chipped in one million shillings to get the quickly expanding institute for advanced studies, the only one in Europe dedicated to East-West discourse, off the ground.¹³ “But let me tell you,” he remarked, “the Austrian government did not lift a finger. The Austrian Ambassador [to Budapest] . . . even told me that I was damaging bilateral relations, and I would hurt Austrian interests with my support for dissidents.”¹⁴ The IWM proved a success story and represents one of the lasting legacies of Busek’s support of dissidents, nonconforming thinkers in Eastern Europe, and intellectual exchanges between East and West.

The change of regimes in 1989–90 ushered in the “second phase,” as Busek called it, of his support for Hungarians. He threw his weight behind the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum [MDF]), hoping it would turn into a CDU¹⁵/ÖVP-style Christian conservative party. It did not, as Busek’s main partner, Prime Minister József Antall, succumbed to cancer and lost the battle for the MDF’s soul to the more nationalist, antisemite István Csurka, Sándor Csoóri, and others. Like so many at the time, he also endorsed a group of law students, including Viktor Orbán, when they founded the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége [FIDESZ]). This support was an early indicator of Busek’s life-long commitment to young people in the region, but obviously Orbán’s political orientation subsequently changed, and Busek later became a critic of his nationalist policies and antagonizing rhetoric.

In 1989, Busek was present in Dubrovnik, where he co-organized a workshop with Péter Hanák on “Co-Existence and Conflict in Central Europe since 1848,” when Miklós Vársárhelyi floated the first idea of what would become the Central European University (CEU).¹⁶ George Soros aspired to establish a campus in each of the region’s capitals, including Vienna. But regrettably Busek, by then Minister of Science, had to inform Soros that Austrian laws could not accommodate his vision, and CEU started off in Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest, only to consolidate in the latter within a few years. It is an irony that toward the end of Busek’s life, after Orbán banished CEU from Hungary, the university would indeed make the former capital of the Habsburg Empire its home.

Once the fall of the Iron Curtain had rendered Austria’s neutrality obsolete, Vice Chancellor Busek pushed for his country’s membership in the European Union. He was partly motivated by the hope that as an EU member,

the country and he himself could be a more effective advocate for Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁷ However, Europe for him was not synonymous with the European Union. In his view, Russia and the Balkans were inherent parts of the story. Busek was shocked by the wars and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and repelled by the Western reaction and media coverage. He resorted, as he so frequently did, to publishing an academic book on the matter.¹⁸

Busek's unceasing commitment to Austria's eastern and southern neighbors and his pursuit of European integration and transborder cooperation saw him politically sidelined in the mid-1990s. He spoke bluntly about his political feuds and frankly admitted what he deemed his "failures," especially his failure to inspire his party and fellow Austrians to embrace their neighbors culturally and emotionally. He proceeded to accept countless appointments to boards of trustees, promoting youth and intellectual exchanges, and regional cooperation in more academic and educational settings. The Institut für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa (Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe) became his institutional home. From there he continued his travels, public appearances, and intellectual interventions.

In recent years, Busek, who had already opposed the ÖVP's controversial coalition with Jörg Haider's Freedom Party, again grew frustrated by the direction the ÖVP took, symbolized by the switch of party colors from black to turquoise: he publicly opposed the foreign policy under then-Minister Sebastian Kurz and disapproved of Kurz's leadership, first as ÖVP general secretary and then as chancellor. In 2017, Busek co-authored his last book with his like-minded, longtime ally Emil Brix, *Central Europe Revisited*. Regardless of the disillusionment that had followed 1989, and the lingering animosities, resentments, and mutual suspicions in the region, regardless of the Orbáns and Kaczyńskis, he still believed optimistically that "Central Europe is indeed the future of Europe."¹⁹ He knew it would take a lot of work for the region to fulfill its true potential, but his commitment to Central Europe remained until the end.

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NOTES

1. See for instance his portrayal by Holly Case and Shalini Randeria at the event “Political Salon: Europe and Austria—The Shape of the Future?,” Institut for Human Sciences, Vienna, Austria, video, 1:24:50, May 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1YC9qPYExo>.
2. Quoted in “Die Ostpolitik des Erhard Busek,” *Der Standard*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000134085329/die-ostpolitik-des-erhard-busek>. For more on their relationship, see Barbara Tóth, *Karl von Schwarzenberg: Die Biographie* [The biography] (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2005), 84, 98, 101–7.
3. Throughout his career, he aspired to shake his fellow Austrians out of their complacency, a goal he proudly declared in Erhard Busek, “Zurück zur Politik” [Back to politics], in *Mut zum aufrechten Gang: Beiträge zu einer anderen Art von Politik* [Courage to walk upright: contributions to a different way of doing politics] (Vienna: Herold, 1983), 9–35.
4. Paul Lendvai, interview with the author, February 5, 2012, Vienna, Austria; Lendvai, “Phänomen Erhard Busek,” *Der Standard*, March 21, 2011, https://www.derstandard.at/story/1297821066854/phaenomen-erhard-busek?_lexikaGroup=4; Lendvai, *Mein Österreich: 50 Jahre hinter den Kulissen der Macht* [My Austria: 50 years behind the curtains of power] (Salzburg: Ecowin, 2007), 11, 54–56. In 1973, Lendvai founded the *Europäische Rundschau* to which Busek, the intellectual and historically minded politician, contributed regularly. The journal was discontinued in 2020. Its archive can be found at <http://www.europaesche-rundschau.at/index4.htm>.
5. Erhard Busek, “100th Anniversary of the Birth of Bruno Kreisky, part VII,” *Wien International*, February 23, 2011.
6. Busek counted Simon Wiesenthal among his friends. See the latter’s appraisal in Simon Wiesenthal, “Der Verlässliche” [The reliable], in *Erhard Busek: Ein Porträt* [A portrait], ed. Elisabeth Welzig (Cologne: Böhlau, 1992), 109–12.
7. Erhard Busek, interview with the author, February 7, 2012, Vienna, Austria.
8. Władysław Bartoszewski, “Der Ostreisende,” in Welzig, *Erhard Busek*, 263–67.
9. Hans-Henning Paetzke, interview with the author, November 8, 2011, Budapest, Hungary.
10. Busek, interview. George [György] Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay*, trans. Richard E. Allen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).
11. Busek, interview.
12. See, for example, the bilingual “Nagymaros: Eine Informationsbroschüre” [An informational brochure] (Vienna: Wagner, n.d.). The brochure contains an interview with the Hungarian founder of the Danube Circle, János Vargha. Open Society Archives, Budapest, HU-OSA 318-0-3.
13. Krzysztof Michalski, “Das Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen: Wie es dazu kam” [The Institute for Human Sciences: how it came to be], *IWM Newsletter* 34 (1992).
14. Busek, interview.
15. Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany).
16. IUC archive, box: IUC documents 1988–90, Book XVI.
17. Erhard Busek and Werner Mikulitsch, eds., *Die Europäische Union auf dem Weg nach Osten* [The European Union on the way East] (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2003).

18. Erhard Busek, *Österreich und der Balkan: Vom Umgang mit dem Pulverfass Europas* [Austria and the Balkans: dealing with the powderkeg of Europe] (Vienna: Molden, 1999). See also his later assessment “Serbian Mythology and Realism,” in *Serbia Matters: Domestic Reforms and European Integration*, ed. Wolfgang Petritsch, Goran Svilanović, and Christophe Solioz (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009).

19. Erhard Busek and Emil Brix, *Central Europe Revisited: Why Europe's Future Will Be Decided in the Region* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 3.