The “Idea of Europe” in Transition

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Abstract

The article addresses the evolution of the “idea of Europe” in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) during the transition period. It presents how anti-communist elites from the 1980s tried portraying the region as equal/complementary to the Western part of the continent and why the latter perceived CEE as the “Other.” It also highlights the switch to nationalist thinking during the first decade of transition and evocation of the “idea of Europe” as one of the nation-states. Finally, it assesses contemporary discourses of “Europe” and contrasts their Western versions to the ones favoured in CEE. The article concludes that the CEE actors have neither developed a shared “idea of Europe” since 1989 nor identified themselves as constituents of an integral region. As of today, the CEE states and nations seek to become members of their imagined versions of Europe, which stress the historical exceptionalism/universalism of the continent, whilst downplaying the newest transnational/global trends in European identity-building.

Keywords: Central Eastern Europe, idea of Europe, European identity, post-communist transition, Others of Europe

Introduction

After the USSR dispersed its geopolitical gravity and collapsed, the post-communist states and nations declared their sovereign readiness to cooperate with the world “beyond-the-Iron-Curtain.” In particular, that meant cooperation with Western Europe and its “freshly-baked” European Union (EU) project.

In the 1990s, each of the post-communist states and nations shared its “idea of Europe.” In the course of the newest history, the initial idea underwent many changes following three decades of transition. There have been actors in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) which demonstrated steady interest, chaotic interest, U-turn interest and low interest in respect to cooperation with and contributing to the “imaginary” Europe and its “flesh-and-bone” incarnation, which was the EU.

This article brings to light the earliest concepts of the “idea of Europe” in the post-communist space, traces the evolution of these concepts throughout thirty years and aims to explain changes in regional and continental views on the socio-political essence of Europe. In a nutshell, this article discusses how the CEE states and nations imagined and pursued their post-communist transition on the way to their discursively constructed destination point, which was regarded as “Europe.”

The article is grounded on three major thematic pillars. Primarily, it outlines the Western European understanding of the “idea of Europe” and the role of CEE in it. Secondly, it presents how the CEE and former Eastern Block’s actors regarded the “idea of Europe” (starting from the 1980s). Finally, it unveils the evolution of self-understanding of the CEE nations as parts of the continent and, thus, constituents of the “idea of Europe” and members of the “European family.”

The article puts forward the hypothesis that no shared “idea of Europe” has ever existed in the post-communist space. Instead, this idea has always been discursively constructed, often unilaterally and uncritically, to capitalise on historical developments and pursue specific political objectives (i.e. emancipation of national identity or joining Transatlantic structures). It has usually been exaggerated and over-romanticised by the regional communities and elites. This said, the feeling of affinity to an obscure “European family” and acceptance of the amoebaen “European values” were enough for the CEE states to legitimise their progress towards “the wider Europe,” which anticipated membership in NATO and the EU.

Western Europe, Cold War and “Otherness” of CEE (Sacrificial Lamb?)

In the early 1990s, Larry Wolff brought back into an academic discourse (reinvented?) the concept of “philosophic geography,” originally coined by John Ledyard (or Astolphe-Louis-Léonor, Marquis de Custine – depending on sources) in the 18th century. Wolff’s concept was about assigning specific places a set of imaginary or philosophical values, often with a geopolitical or ideological saturation typical for the Cold War (Iordachi 2012, 43).[1] That concept made it easier for the West Europeans to explain why their Eastern neighbours were the “Others” of the continent; today, it can explain why these “Others” have always existed in the Western identity and what was their role in the Western “idea of Europe.”

[1] In this respect Jacob Mikanowski (2015) also writes: “Eastern Europe belongs less to the geography recorded in road atlases than to psychogeography. It isn’t really a place, but a state of mind.”

To begin with, the biased postulates of "philosophic geography" turned out to be disastrous for the CEE nations in the 20th century.[2] The global arrangements following the Second World War (WW2) and introducing zones of influence can provide some eloquent examples.

In 1943, during the Conference in Tehran, Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill spoke about post-WW2 architecture. That was one of the first topical meetings of the "Big Three," in which Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia became bidding tokens in the Western leaders' power-play with the Soviets (Overy 1996, 245-246). Notwithstanding the activities and successes of the local anti-Nazi resistances, the CEE states were doomed to fall into the Kremlin's sphere of influence after the war was over (Pastusiak 2017, 80).

Then Yalta came. During the talks in Crimea in 1945, the Eastern European (EE) states were legitimised as parts of the Soviet Union while the Central European (CE) as its satellites. At the same time, Greece avoided concurrent fate, not least due to Churchill's defining it as the "cradle of the European civilisation" and the land of "immortal glories." While being "no less Balkan state" than Romania and Bulgaria, Greece existed in the Western discourse as non-belonging to the region (Riabchuk 2021).

Himself, Wolff (1994, 7) wrote of the "philosophic geography" as of a "free-spirited sport" of the West: "it was not actually necessary to travel to Eastern Europe in order to participate in its intellectual discovery." In line with this, Mykola Ryabchuk (2021) claims that because of the "philosophic geography," West Europeans continue believing that "the Ukrainian border is much further away from Vienna than the Swiss border (even though in fact it is hundred kilometers closer), and Krakow and Budapest are located much closer to Moscow than to Paris."

In this respect, Gerard Delanty (2019, 399) argues that the West European nations rarely considered the "European Orient" as a genuinely European space: "Prior to 1989, it was possible to speak of European unity only at the cost of excluding Central and Eastern Europe. The unity of Europe was the unity of the West and a unity that could with some plausibility be described as a political project underpinned by certain assumptions, such as liberal democracy, capitalism and Christianity." Therefore, the CEE existential beliefs in a shared and unifying "idea of Europe" were serenely rejected by the Western nations as "uncomfortable."

In turn, Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (2009, 5-6) claim that the "Otherness" of CEE was exacerbated by two theoretical schools of studying European integration in the 1960s. The first was neo-functionalist led by Erns W. Haas. Its representatives believed that the integration was a cause-and-effect process that required the unceasing invention of common solutions for common challenges. Political elites were supposed to react to and reflect on the functional dynamics of integration; otherwise, they would "fall" as one falls from the bicycle. The second school was

[2] In this article, unless mentioned otherwise, the author will understand the following nations as CEE: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

communicational/transactional, with its major partisan being Karl W. Deutsch. It argued that a candid necessity for movement of goods, people, services and ideas between and within European states led to their approximation and could even evoke a shared identity. Both schools, however, downplayed (disregarded?) the role of CEE in the European integration: the region was neither functionally connected to the West nor could freely communicate with it through the Iron Curtain. It was the "Other."

Before 1989, the negligible Western perception of CEE stirred controversial emotions among the regional non-communist elites (including *émigré*).[3] On the one hand, the latter could not but feel betrayed – there were more than enough reasons to conclude that the West had sacrificed CEE to please the "Soviet beast." On the other hand, the "beast" was there, indeed! The hatred which the regional elites bore against the Soviets exceeded by a large margin their frustration with the Western insensibility. Therefore, the hard feelings were to be quelled when choosing between lesser evils.

In order to draw some intermediary conclusions, during the Cold War, the CEE "idea of Europe" was the one of imaginary West (i.e. a desired antipode to the USSR). The Western self-perception and its geopolitical essence were downplayed. The issue of the "philosophic geography" and the identity borders within Europe were downplayed as well because of the omnipotent desire to pursue independent development without the Kremlin's meddling. Western Europe thus became an embodiment of "anti-experience," the desired destination point, "unknown" land of true freedom and prosperity (whatever that meant), and thus it was invariably better than the "known" Soviet milieu.

This said, the pragmatism of the Western policies towards the USSR was acknowledged but somewhat over-romanticised. The CEE non-communist intellectuals and statesmen preferred to look at their Western counterparts as leaders of the free world, not elected authorities who had to think about the interests of their states in the first place. The latter thinking made the Western leaders prone to sacrifice the neighbouring CEE nations-in-struggle to please the "Soviet beast" (which happened quite often in history and came as a bitter "surprise").

Finally – and this stems from the previous point – there was growing resentment among the CEE non-communist elites with a discrepancy between the Western declared affiliation to *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and their pragmatic (and insensible) policies regarding the region. Not only the CEE nations became a sacrificial lamb for the USSR, but the Western leaders themselves demonstrated hypocrisy in their occasional statements of support.

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[3] Discussing the "ideas of Europe," one should acknowledge that they were *per se* an intellectual exercise of non-communist elites who spoke against the Kremlin-promoted visions of the regional space. Very few communist intellectuals considered it justified to develop "ideas of Europe."

Nevertheless, the regional intellectuals and statesmen continued "connecting" their nations to the "European family" and worked hard to juxtapose their "ideas of Europe" against the Soviet conception of "brotherly peoples."

Intellectual Attempts to Connect CEE to the Rest of Europe: 1980-1990ss

In the 1980s, CEE experienced a burst of grass-roots intellectual theorising on the regional European (anti-Soviet?) identity. One of the igniting factors for such a burst was the "love-hate" relations with the West. Regional non-communist elites searched for cogent arguments which, on the one hand, would manifest their European ancestry and, on the other hand, would prove their uniqueness. That search led to a balanced conceptualisation of the Central Eastern European space, which retains some of its validity up to now.

In his world-famous (pioneering!) essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe," first published in French in 1983, Milan Kundera undertook an attempt to surmount discourses of "Otherness" and "political geography" and portray (or explain to the West) what "kind of Europe" CEE was. Kundera's essay became an intellectual act of self-discovery fine-tuned for the Western reader (Riabchuk 2021; Stolarz 2013, 24).

In the most general terms, Kundera stated that the commonly used concept "Eastern Europe" was inadequate, artificial and divisive.[4] It served the needs of the Cold war struggle, unlike the concept "Central Europe," which Kundera tried to re-introduce into the regional and global discourses. He did so by delivering two messages.

Firstly, Kundera brought to light the contribution of the Central European actors to the continental culture and heritage throughout centuries. He underscored uncanny commonalities between identities of the "Eastern" and "Western" halves of Europe, presenting the latter as the aggregate and indivisible entity. Kundera (1984, 35) wrote of CE (which may be extrapolated to CEE today) as of a flexible space defined by the circulation of intertwined memories and fates: "Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation … Central Europe therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers (…) but by the great common situations (…) the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition."

[4] In line with this, in 1984, Vernon A. Aspaturian (12) concluded that "Eastern Europe" had neither been a naturally-emerging concept, nor manifested any unity (apart from ideological) in international relations: "in spite of political-ideological homogeneity that characterizes contemporary Eastern Europe, it is a remarkably diverse aggregation of states an nations in terms of traditional characteristics. It has been the traditional diversities … that have shaped the Eastern European past and have determined its political fate to be more often of an object of the international system than a subject, individually and collectively."

The second message resided in rebuking the status of the CEE region as the “Other” of Europe. This traditional Western view (also emphasised by Delanty in the quote above) was incorrect as CEE fell into the Soviet orbit due to the sequence of circumstances, not by its own volition (i.e. the region was “stolen” by malicious and anti-European Russian actors). According to Kundera, this would never happen if Western Europe preserved its identity untouched. In other words, the Western half failed to understand the continental “unity as a cultural unity,” to which CEE had always been a part; instead, it switched to comfortably regarding the region as “nothing but a political regime.” In such a way, the Western half willingly forfeited a rich part of a shared culture and history, affiliated with “Central Europe,” to replace it with a decadent and deficient concept of “Eastern Europe,” which sounded as a paraphrase of the “Eastern Block.” Kundera (1984, 36-37) encouraged both halves to correct this injustice.

Even before Kundera, in 1978, Václav Havel (272) in his extended essay “The Power of the Powerless” noted that the CEE societies invariably gravitated towards the Western values: “Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organisation, in short, towards the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline.” This observed dichotomy of movement, alongside Havel’s encouragement for the readers to “live in individual truth,” manifested the affinity of the CEE identity to the Western one. Havel argued that the communism-centred post-totalitarian system was unfit for the world inasmuch as it was unfit for the region.

In 1983, in his research “The Three Historical Regions of Europe,” Jenő Szűcs (1995, 62-63) presented the academic justification for the legitimacy of the CEE space.[5] As a professional historian, Szűcs analysed economic patterns, forms of governance, and social interactions on the continent throughout centuries. He thus notified the existence of fuzzy borders separating Western Europe from Eastern, as well as pointed on the region in between, rallied around the ethnic Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Hungarian lands. This was the region where Western Christianity and philosophy amalgamated with the Eastern traditions of governance and social relations. Thus, being in between, the CEE space was manifested as an inalienable part of the wider Europe and a unique constituent of the continental identity (Stolarz 2013, 27).

Almost at the same time, in 1984, György Konrád (1984, 91) published “Antipolitics” and delivered another powerful message: “We Hungarians, Czechs and Poles are crowding here on the western margin of the empire and on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, with a cautious self-preservation strategy and restless thoughts, because we do not want to be identified with the East and we cannot be identified with the West.” Unlike Kundera or Szűcs, he placed greater emphasis

[5] Actually, Szűcs, unlike Kundera, preferred using CEE, not CE, throughout his text.

on the local CE identity *per se*, which was portrayed through contrasts to "omnipresent" communist East and similarities to "detached" democratic West. In his other publication, Konrád (1982, 12) also stressed distinctive cultures of Czechia, Poland, and Hungary, which gravitated towards the West, yet possessed features from both flanks of Europe, having accommodated them through either consent or coercion.

In the earliest post-Cold war period, Samuel P. Huntington (1998, 61) arrived with a few "civilisational questions," the answers to which became tricky for the CEE nations. Huntington claimed that with the ideologies withered, the "which side are you on?" question got replaced by "what are you?" In his turn, Claus Offe (1996, 32) highlighted that "At the most fundamental level a 'decision' must be made [by the CEE people] as to who 'we' are, that is, a decision on identity, citizenship and the territorial, as well as social and cultural, boundaries of the nation state." Addressing these questions and decisions provoked clashes of identifications in CEE. On the one hand, the regional nations used to present themselves as belonging to a single geopolitical space, from-beyond-the-Iron-Curtain; on the other hand, they prioritised self-perception as separate cores of "new" sovereign entities instead of cherishing a unique and transboundary cultural identity, which would rightfully become a part a broader European (so highly praised by Kundera). The Visegrád Group states were exemplary in this regard.

According to Paweł Borkowski (2019, 38), after its initiation, the Visegrád Group never tried to nurture the spirit of "Visegrád-ness." Its member-states neither capitalised on "historical baggage, or mark, [which] could be the basis for common political initiatives" nor they managed to create "a brand name" and make the "positive contribution [to] the construction of spirit of 'all Europe'." On their way to NATO and the EU, the Visegrád states behaved like individual self-concerned actors instead of speaking in one voice. In this light, Józef M. Fiszer (2019, 58) concludes that the intention of uniting CEE on the basis of shared regional and European values has always been unrealistic.

The Visegrád Group did not anticipate any further enlargement into the region as well. On May 19, 1992, the President of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, raised an initiative for his state to join the Group. During his visit to Poland, he dropped a statement that "[the] quadrangle is a more perfect figure than the triangle, it offers more opportunities."[6] This statement did not sound attractive to the CE elites, though. They were intensively integrating their states into European and Transatlantic structures, which automatically made the development of relations with Ukraine a burden. The "NATO-bis" idea – raised at a certain point by the President Lech Wałęsa, who advocated advanced security cooperation between all "new" states of the Baltic and the Black Sea

[6] At that time, the Visegrád Group included three members: Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Therefore, Kravchuk referred to it as to a quadrangle. For more details see: Kushnir 2019, 54; Afanasiev 2014, 55.

littorals, – was also promptly shot down by CE elites (Laruelle and Rivera 2019, 19; Bugriy 2019, 117).

In the late 1990s, the President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, decided to overlook CE states and organise the EE region around Ukraine (appeal to a common identity?). On December 28, 1998, he issued an order to prepare an international conference: “Baltic-Black Sea Cooperation: Towards an Integrated Europe of the XXI Century Without Separating Lines.” The conference took place in Yalta on September 10-11, 1999, and concluded with Kuchma’s call to create an inter-governmental organisation uniting the regional states on the north to south axis. This was wishful thinking. The geopolitical incompatibilities of the EE region would prevent any kind of coherent integration. President Aliaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus was not present at the conference, and this removed Belarus from the chain. Representatives of the Baltic republics were sympathetic but restrained; they invariably favoured NATO and the EU, which they wanted to join as the Northern (Nordic?) states. Russia was straightforwardly hostile and sabotaged any kind of integration. Therefore, no breakthrough in the regional feeling of solidarity took place (Bykanov 2000, 56; Shpak 2003, 173).

These and other integrationist misconducts raise a question: to what extend were Kundera, Szűcs, Konrád and Havel correct in their assessments of CEE? Couldn’t their theorising be nothing but an elitarian attempt to invent a human community bound together by universal and pluralist values, could it? To paraphrase, the messages of these (and other) intellectuals might have sounded great but seemed to convey only partially legitimate meanings; the latter seemed to collide with – or not be fully comprehensive to – the mass vision of the CEE region and Europe. The vision which looked to be much more nationalist (Foster and Grzymski 2019, 8).

Zsuzsa Csergo (2011, 83) specifically emphasised the gradual nationalisation of the “ideas of Europe” in the mid-1990s. The CEE societies started thinking in state-centred categories and unambiguously favoured their national values over the regional: “Ethnically conceived national groups all over the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe viewed democratisation as the opportunity finally to achieve or consolidate national sovereignty over territories they claimed as their ‘national homelands’.” These societies’ vision of the “return to Europe” envisaged independent evolution of their states on the tracks of nationalism, the “restoration of justice.” The dominance of title nations (most numerous ethnic groups?) was to be achieved through post-communist emancipation and the adoption of European principles of the rule of law. According to Csergo (2011, 84), “in some cases, aspirations to strengthen national cultures while joining an integrated Europe seemed fully compatible.”

To draw some intermediary conclusions, the 1990s demonstrated that neither a clear shared identity nor a shared “idea of Europe” existed in CEE. The creative efforts of the intellectuals from the 1980s brought limited effects (as one can observe in the developments within and outside of the

Visegrád Group, as well as futile Ukraine's integrationist initiatives). Instead, there existed a mosaic of interpretations of the regional and continental identities, which single states and nations regarded as "shared ideas." Those interpretations, however, happened to be enough for the majority of the CEE states to join NATO and the EU.[7]

Pan-European Multiplication of "Central Eastern Europes": 2000-2010

The 2000s – this is when the confusion began. The "Eastern Europe" as the Cold war concept was rightfully dead.[8] There existed no communism-dictated ideological necessity to use it as a common denominator for the "Central Europe" or "Central Eastern Europe" regions. However, paradoxically, the latter terms also started circulating in public discourse as artificial inventions, remnants of the Cold war realities.

The CE and CEE gradually lost their universal appeals due to (at least) two factors. Primarily, there was no longer a need to contrast the uniqueness of the Central European space against the communist one. The "Soviet beast" passed out. The West became "open." Secondly, not all of the CEE states and nations agreed to be geopolitically assigned to one region as one basket; that worked fine in the 1980s – as a strategy of manifesting a united alternative to "Eastern Europe" – but things changed after the USSR collapsed. The nationalist aspirations grew. The multiplication of regional affiliations started. According to Offe (1996, 35), one of the dimensions of the post-communist transition was territorial, "that is, the determination of the borders for a state and a population, and the consolidation of these borders within the framework of a European order of states ('common European home')."

Riabchuk (2021) argues that in the mid-1990s, "Central Europe" as an identity concept was eagerly embraced by the Czechs, Hungarians, partly Slovaks, who also hated to remain "Eastern Europeans," and Slovenes who loathed to be "Balkans." Poles and Romanians switched to identifying themselves as cores of the "Central Eastern Europe"; Ukrainians, Moldovans, and Belarusians wanted to do the same, but slipped and thus stalled in the eyes of neighbours as "true"

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7 According to Franco Zappettini (2019, 27), the EU has recently became associated with an institutionalised vessel which preserves and nurtures the development of the European identity: "In the last decades, therefore, there has been a surge of academic interest in the notion of Europe and the 'European community' as sociopolitical constructs primarily in relation to an increased politicization of identities, legitimization processes of the EU institutions, as well as sociocultural flows and historical perspectives." See also: Grzymski 2017, 61.

8 Aspaturian (1984, 8) claimed that the only factor keeping the "Eastern European" states together was the USSR: "The relationship of individual East European states to Soviet Union at any given time will remain the single most important and uncomplicated variable conditioning the international behavior of the states in the region." To this, Serhii Plokhiy (2011, 763) adds that the borders of "Eastern Europe" (ideological and imaginary) had always been a debatable topic, which only intensified in post-Cold war era: "The web will provide you with endless variants, starting with those that treat the region as everything between Prague in the west and the Ural Mountains in the east, and ending with more 'modest' proposals … which would limit the region to the former western borderlands of the Soviet Union, from Estonia in the north to Moldova in the south."

“Eastern Europe,” or even parts of “Eurasia” (the “old-new” term which Russia used to notify its “sphere of privileged interests”). Baltic nations “abandoned” the CEE (CE) identity entirely and declared themselves “Nordic.” Croats, Montenegrins, and Albanians became “Mediterraneans.” Bulgarians had no choice because the very term “Balkans” originates from the name of mountains on their territory. All this meandering of affiliations reflected nationalist and (finally) sovereign searches for identity (Foster and Grzymski 2019, 8).

The political and economic developments in CEE further partitioned the region. In the 1990s, both Soviet republics and satellite states commenced their transitions from similar starting points.[9] However, by the mid-2000s, the deviations between the transition trajectories grew appalling. Whereas the Visegrád Group and other “western” CEE states focused on the enhancement of the European integration and proceeded with the adoption of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*, Ukraine, alongside its northern and southern neighbours, continued debating strategies of national state-building; in particular, they pondered the appropriateness of de-Sovietization, de-Russification, and de-oligarchization (Tyushka 2021).

A new watershed came in 2004 when three groups of post-communist states entified in the region: (1) former USSR republics which became the EU members; (2) former Soviet satellites which became the EU members; and (3) former USSR republics which remained outside of the EU. In other words, in 2004, the former “Eastern European” states joined different geopolitical baskets, which made Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova find themselves squeezed between the EU (whose eastern borders overlapped with borders of the once “brotherly nations”) and Russia. A paradoxical situation occurred. There were three states in the east of Europe which could not be defined as “Eastern Europe” due to the concept being “dead.” They also protested against the revival of that concept due to its sinister ideological essence and much wider geographical reach. They had very little shared identity *per se* (as proved by the failures of Kuchma’s integrationist projects). Outside of their region, according to Serhii Plokhyi (2011, 764), there was no consensus on whether these states should (could?) ever join CEE (f.e. Jerzy Kłoczowski insisted on Ukraine’s belonging to CEE while Paul Robert Magocsi included only Ukraine’s west and central parts in his *Atlas of East-Central Europe*). Therefore, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova became known as “New Eastern Europe.”

Speaking of the EU’s post-communist and post-Soviet newcomers, Checkel and Katzenstein (2009, 18-19) concluded that they “brought into play very different historical memories from those shared by West Europeans. The encounter with Islam, the experience of delayed modernisation,

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[9] Mikhail Minakov (2021) writes in this respect that “the creative destruction of the Soviet Marxist vision of the future was substituted by the prophecy of moving from authoritarian politics, state censorship, political police, and administrative economy towards civil freedoms, liberal democracy, pluralist politics, and a free market. This was called an ‘all-encompassing transition’ in 1989-91.”

occupation by Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union have created a vast storehouse of potentially differentiating memories. Contingency – in the form of individual leaders (De Gaulle, Thatcher, Kohl, Blair, Merkel, or Sarkozy) or unexpected epochal events (the 1973 energy crisis, the 1983 French U-turn, the end of the Cold War, the Balkan wars, 9/11) must also be given their due in any analysis of the politization of European identities." In other words, the growing post-enlargement identity polarisations between CEE and Western Europe, as within CEE itself, stemmed from different historical experiences which generated different popular fears, expectations, visions of happiness or justice.

On top of that, the change in the composition of the EU triggered re-conceptualisation of the "idea of Europe" in the Western part of the continent. Therefore, it is constructive to discuss the specificities of returning to a "European family" by looking at what kind of family the CEE states and nations return to.

According to Delanty (2019, lii-liii), the modern Western European identity draws from three wells: (1) concern with solidarity and social justice, which are getting institutionalised through social citizenship and social democracy regardless of borders; (2) conception of the "autonomous" individual, who seems to prefer "idea of Europeans" over the "idea of Europe"; (3) conception of the globalised world which makes Europeans self-conscious through self-comparison to the more distant societies (Asia, Africa, and the Americas). To put it differently, Delanty concludes that "Europe" in its Western understanding represents a habitat of autonomous individuals (yet socially, solidary, and cross-borderly integrated), who acknowledge themselves as members of a distinct community, the features of which can be embraced only through looking from the "outside."[10] As he writes: "The transnational dimension of European integration is essential to the viability of political community, which needs to expand in a cosmopolitan direction." He also adds that "Such a [cosmopolitan] re-orientation will require a re-visiting of the legacies of history" (Delanty 2019, 427).

Contrarily, the majority of the CEE states and nations seem to be reluctant to "re-visiting of legacies of history"; the latter are often over-emphasised (over-praised?) in regional political discourses. At the same time, the individual-focused (yet solidary) view on Europe is downplayed at the expense of imagining continental societies as a "family." The global (cosmopolitan?) self-

[10] Zappettini (2019, 33-34) adds to this point that "The emergence of transnational practices and the exponential growth of transnational ties … have increasingly blurred established physical, social and cultural boundaries of nationhood and community belonging (…) Transnational practices can generate 'third spaces' where individuals can find 'cultural positionality' in reference to a boundless time and space between national territories. Th is 'in-betweenness' does not reproduce the dominant narrative but rather allows for 'hybridity' which, in some cases, could be interpreted as a 'counter-narrative of the nation'."

assessing view on Europe is yet to be developed in CEE (particularly because of its colonial, not colonialist history).

In their modern conceptualisations of the “idea of Europe,” the CEE states and nations seem to search for a balance between – generally speaking – three identity pillars: European exceptionalism, European universalism and Trans-Atlantism.[11] Exceptionalism may be defined here as a belief that the European identity emanates from Greek philosophy, Westphalian sovereignty, and Christian morality. For many CEE states, specifically Poland and Hungary, this pillar became pivotal in the last decade (Chojan 2021). Other states often prefer perceiving Europe as an entity constructed around universal democratic values and human rights. For them, European nations are united in diversity, which means shared history, legislature and political institutions, but different cultures, visions of happiness and patterns of social interaction (Grzymski 2017, 66). This perception is common for Czechia, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania; it stands close (yet not analogous) to what Delanty defines as a “new norm” for Western Europe (Marušiak 2021; Bennich-Björkman 2021). Poland adjusted its policies to the universalist pillar in the 2007-2015 period. Ukraine and Moldova started paying greater attention to it after the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Donbas (Mahda and Khvostova 2021). Finally, the third pillar, Trans-Atlantism, often reinforced European universalism as it advocated the necessity of a deeper entrenchment into the Western world (i.e. NATO membership, which became pivotal for Romania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland and the “new” Nordic states). This said, it also occasionally eroded universalism and strengthened exceptionalism as the Trans-Atlantic structures were regarded as inhibitors to the EU’s integration (f.e. Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia in the last decade). Then there has always been a factor of Russia that encouraged many regional states, among them war-torn Ukraine, to seek advanced cooperation with the US.

To a significant degree, the modern CEE “idea of Europe” is about an ambition of returning to (restoration of?) “historical Europe,” inaccessible for the region for centuries. That was the Europe of nation-states, a thing in itself, united around the Christian values. While the history of the West has already passed through that point, the CEE nations seem to want to grasp what they have missed as “non-historical” ones (Lysiak Rudnytsky 1981, 358-68). In this light, the CEE actors anticipate that Western Europe would agree to and accommodate their sorrows and expectations. This would also “purify” the whole of the continent: instead of cherishing “individualistic

[11] Checkel and Katzenstein (2009, 11-12) refer to exceptionalism as to “populist conception” wile to universalism as to “cosmopolitan” conception: “These cosmopolitan and populist conceptions of identity differ in both the form and the content of politization. Cosmopolitan conceptions appeal to and are motivated by elite-level politics. Populist conceptions reflect and respond to mass politics. Cosmopolitan conceptions focus on political citizenship and rights. Populist conceptions center on issues of social citizenship and cultural authenticity.”

autonomisation" (and secularisation), Western Europe would return to progress centred around nation-states' interests and Christian rapport.[12]

Separate beliefs circulating in the regional discourses argue that the CEE nations understand better what the "true" Europe is. These beliefs may sound arrogant, yet they encourage governments in Warsaw and Budapest to occasionally self-praise themselves as the only "true" holders of European identity. The manifestations of self-appraisal happened, for instance, during the trilateral summit on April 1, 2021, between Hungary, Poland and Italy. Summit participants agreed to stand against the "forces that cut themselves off from the common heritage of Europe, respect for the family, sovereign state, human dignity, respect for truth, the right of nations to self-determination" and reinforce Christian conservative values against the "leftist" universalism (TVN24 | Świat, 2021).

On the contrary, the CEE nations which favour the universalist pillar do not regard it in the same way as Western Europe. They neither focus on the concepts of "autonomous individual" and transboundary solidarity nor apply the perspective from the "outside" to understand themselves. Instead, they highlight the importance of a nation-state as a habitat of individual citizens in the construction of continental orders. In this light, the vision of Czechs is exemplary (Marušiak 2021). On the one hand, it includes a universalist understanding of the superiority of democratic liberalism and portrays the nation as one of the world's most consistent champions of human rights (political legacy of Václav Havel). On the other hand, Czechia was the birthplace of a pragmatic Euro-realist concept with its clear emphasis on the protection of state sovereignty against the EU's multilateral assaults (political legacy of Václav Klaus).

Conclusion

To summarise, many features of the CEE identity, as well as the indigenous "idea of Europe," are rooted in the geopolitical obscurity of the region. Up to now, no one managed to clearly grasp its borders. That particularly happened because the regional borders rarely overlapped with the borders of states; they also shifted with time to reflect changes in the "imaginary" national affiliations (Grzymski 2019). In the 1990s, Ukraine was not regarded as a part of CEE (one may look at Kravchuk's futile attempts to join the Visegrád Group); in 2014, during the Euromaidan, Ukraine unequivocally proved itself as a trend-setter in the CEE politics; meanwhile, for more than

[12] Some of the Western philosophers add fuel to this belief. For instance, Chantal Delsol defines the CEE as "hope for Europe" which would save the West from drowning in relativism and nihilism. Western Europe should draw from its "periphery" where the true Christian spirit was preserved, the one which is tolerant and guided by dignity. See: Stolarz 2013, 34-36.

a century, Western Ukrainians believed that they lived in the geographical centre – and thus ideological pivot – of Europe.[13]

Kudera, Havel, Szűcs and Konrád portrayed CEE as a space on the intersection of European and Asian cultural influences, albeit with a natural attraction to the West (which they saw as a rightful place to belong). Such a portrayal made sense during the Cold war (as an attempt to resist the "Soviet beast's" grip) but started losing its appeal in the 1990s when the newly sovereign entities switched to nationalist thinking. Many more internal divisions came to being, and a single "CEE" denominator became too imprecise and too unfit to manifest each of the regional constituents' uniqueness.

The "CEE" denominator reached its functional limits not least because the regional states and nations started proudly perceiving their indigenous identities as inseparable elements of a wider European identity. The latter perception often required completion of a self-imposed "homework": infiltration of truly national (nationalist?) features from the "Soviet-imposed," which could provoke conflicts and tensions between different communities within one nation, or even between different nations. In a word, the post-communist entities tried using the liberty of their sovereign "return to Europe" to refine (or even construct) their indigenous identities as "European." This led to the unwillingness of the regional entities to cooperate, speak in one voice and proceed with shared "ideas of Europe."

At the utmost level, the transitional process in CEE has always embraced the nostalgic features of returning to "the lost paradise" – be that the "imaginary" Europe or a more "abstract" West – the shape of which the CEE states and nations seemed to know better than the rest of the world. The paradox here is that the shape of "the lost paradise" has always remained a subject to change in the region as it continuously vacillated between the pillars of European exceptionalism, universalism and Trans-Atlantism. It is only Belarus where the "idea of Europe" – if not a broader nation-wide understanding of belonging to Europe – is yet to be refined (unless the Belarus nation decides to retain its Eurasian self-identification).

This said, the CEE regional states often downplay the "idea of Europe" as seen from the Western part of the continent. They prefer praising their "new" national (nationalist?) allegiance to the "European family," continue uncritically contributing to that "family," and evade understanding what that "family" is really about (and if it can be named a "family"). This is not an all-embracing geopolitical practice in the region, but it can be clearly observed.

If one takes an "outside" perspective on contemporary Europe, the CEE states and nations in the post-communist era became parts (sometimes regardless of their sovereign will) of natural pan-continental processes, which in turn are parts of global. By returning to the "European family" (or

[13] According to Austrian calculations from 1885-87, the geographical centre of Europe is located in the small town of Rakhiv, or the village of Dilove near Rakhiv, in contemporary Western Ukraine.

by trying to return there as Ukraine and Moldova do), the CEE actors accomplished much more than simply restored their rightful place with the West. The magnitude and consequences of this accomplishment are yet to be acknowledged by many.

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