| Introduction |

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'Am Anfang war Napoleon' ('In the beginning it was Napoleon'). The famous opening sentence of Thomas Nipperdey's work on the history of Germany fits more than just his homeland. The Napoleonic Wars brought about fundamental economic, political, and social changes throughout Europe; most of these changes have their roots in the Enlightenment and the great French Revolution of 1789. The main ideological drivers from the first half of the 19th century onward were the ideas of liberalism and nationalism. These were soon joined by conservatism, born in reaction to liberalism and nationalism, and socialism, which sought to deal with the social consequences of economic processes. Although Europe was often at war, there was also always a strong desire for peace, which took various forms. The ideas of European or regional integration that emerged during the period under discussion served the cause of peace. Their importance was heightened by the two world wars in the 20th century.

Thanks to the new ideas, the concept of the state gradually began to change in the 19th century. In the dynastic concept of the state, nations did not have kings, but kings had countries and peoples. Now, however, a different conceptual construct was coming to the fore. The culturally and linguistically determined peoples (nations) began to feel that they had a right to a say in politics and that their own national statehood, or at least their public autonomy, was the most appropriate framework for this. The process of German and Italian unification that would define the entire 19th century was soon under way. There was also the unresolved and sensitive Polish question in the Central and Eastern European regions, together with the aspirations of many smaller peoples, which are still felt today.

Although ideas to unite the peoples of Europe were born a long time ago, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries (see the plans of Immanuel Kant and later Victor Hugo), movements began to emerge that sought to implement integration plans not only in theory but also in practice. These plans were also strongly influenced by political changes and the locations of their origins. The situations and positions of small and large European nations were different. The old state traditions also played an important role in this process, together with ethnic and cultural relationships (especially toward the Slavic nations). Based on this, four major eras can be distinguished: (1) from the Napoleonic Wars to the end of the First World War, (2) from the end of

the First World War to the end of the Second World War, (3) the communist regimes between 1948 and 1989, and finally (4) from the collapse of communist dictatorships until the enlargement of the European Union.

1. From the Napoleonic Wars to the end of World War I

The series of wars that began in the late 18th century also paved the way for Napoleon to pursue a hegemony over Central Europe in a broad sense (including Germany). France had begun building a 'Grand Empire' over the European continent.[1] The series of wars that lasted for almost a quarter of a century radically changed the conditions of power in Europe.[2] The conservative participants of the 1815 Congress of Vienna attempted to reorganize Europe based on legitimacy and dynastic principles. However, nationalism, one of the most significant currents of ideas in the 19th century, laid the foundations for forming nation-states and fundamentally questioned the arrangement adopted at the Vienna Congress.

In this historical framework, the conceptual definitions of 'nation' and 'nation-state' posed an additional problem. These concepts are not clear; moreover, they have changed historically, and it does not matter whether we try to formulate them from a historical, cultural, economic, social, or political point of view. The idea of a nation-state as one homogeneous nation living within a territory—based on realities—had already been surpassed at that time.

During this period, Central and Eastern Europe were largely covered by the Austrian, Russian, and Turkish empires. Of these, however, only the Habsburg Empire was truly and exclusively a Central European state formation. The Russians and Ottomans had major centers and priorities elsewhere.

The geographically intermediate Central European great power faced enemies on almost every border. From the south and east, it was threatened by the Ottoman and Russian Empires; from the northwest, Prussia; and from the west, it was indirectly threatened by France. The small nations that existed in the Habsburg Empire's territory also saw the Empire as a kind of shield that provided protection against stronger empires.[3]

The small peoples living in the grip of the great powers realized that they could not survive in isolation and on their own. Ideas emerged for two main courses of cooperation. One aimed at reforming the Habsburg Empire while remaining within it, and the other saw the solution as a cooperation of small states that would become independent during the disintegration of the Empire.[4] Related to this was the problem

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1 Nipperdey, 1983, pp. 11 and 13.
2 Hobsbawn, 1962, p. 77.
3 Mitchell, 2020, p. 9.
4 Segesváry, 2004, p. 4.

of the 'Eastern Question,'[5] which encouraged statesmen concerned about the future of nation-states to work together, especially in the Balkans. It played a particularly important role for the smaller Slavic peoples; however, the geographic identity along the Danube should not be forgotten. These attitudes sometimes complemented and sometimes intersected.

At the Vienna Congress, Metternich, who had Habsburg's imperial interests in mind, saw not only dynastic interests and legitimacy as the foundation of a state order for peace, but also the equality and balance of the great powers. Metternich's policy was based on slowing down processes, conserving existing structures, and striking a special balance of interests. However, his ideas could not be realized because they kept the state and elites in mind rather than society, and the German ethnic group was given priority over the others. Views of Austria during this period were also influenced by theories about the German alliance and changes in relations with Prussia. Concepts (such as the Belvedere circle led by Franz Ferdinand) came to the fore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were aimed at a federal transformation of the Monarchy in which each member state would have been given full autonomy.

Fears of ethnic movements and expansive Russian and German aspirations left their mark on the concepts formulated in Hungary. At the beginning of the 19th century, those who thought about the country's fate recognized the historical situation: that the future and integrity of Hungary and the Habsburg Empire were closely linked and that Hungary at that time could only be maintained within the Habsburg Empire. Although the ideas of internal federalization (László Teleki) intensified in the precarious, temporary state that developed after the defeat in the war of independence, they did not last long. Most Hungarian national liberals refused the idea of federalizing the country but also criticized the plans for territorial autonomy. However, by this time, it became clear that, due to the presence of nationalities, the only alternative in the region to the Habsburg Empire was a federation. However, due to the 1867 Compromise, more comprehensive federation or confederate plans were pushed back into Hungarian public thinking, making Hungary a pillar of the dualist empire. Here, the territorial autonomy was only granted to Croatia (1868), which could justify it with historical arguments. The Hungarian political elites of the time were not very willing to listen to other arguments. Budapest pursued a centralist policy toward the other nationalities and refused to grant them territorial autonomy. As compensation, the Parliament in Budapest adopted the liberal act on rights of nationalities in 1867. This

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5 This term refers to the opposition between the European great powers in settling the power space created by the weakening of the Turkish Empire. The problem was outlined in the peace that ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1874 when Russia reached the Black Sea and obtained the right of protection over the Orthodox in the Danube principalities and the Ottoman Empire. This was followed by a major shift in Russian foreign policy aimed at gaining influence over the Balkans, or at least part of it, and acquiring Constantinople and the Straits. However, realizing these goals depended not only on the Russian-Turkish power relationship, but also on the other great powers. See Majoros, 1997, p. 59.

act focused on individual minority rights and was relatively generous, but its practical realization was problematic.

The Czechs were the third largest nation in the Habsburg Empire, and they were able to appeal to historical constitutional arguments in public disputes. They had also bailed out the troubled Monarchy in 1848/1849. Indeed, the existence of the Habsburg Empire served their economic interests, and the Czech provinces became the most developed region of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It is no coincidence that the main proponents of the Austro-Slavic Federation were Czechs. This concept was developed as early as the first half of the 19th century under the leadership of František Palacký and Karel Havlíček Borovský. Nevertheless, in the second half of the period, they found it increasingly difficult to identify with the existing constitutional framework. The failure of the Czech-Austrian reconciliation and the Austro-Hungarian-Czech trial played a decisive role in this. In addition, Czech public opinion was seriously influenced by fear of the large German minority, which increasingly failed to identify with the framework of the historical Czech statehood and increasingly looked to the growing Second German Empire (Reich) in the neighborhood. The Czech-German antagonism in the period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy slowly became the greatest problem in the Western part of the empire.

After the Napoleonic Wars, the smaller Slavic nations in the Habsburg Empire also began to think about their own future, their federal policy, and their possible full or partial independence. Perhaps best placed were the Catholic Croats, with their ancient territorial and legal autonomy, who enjoyed considerable popularity in Vienna. They were among the mainstays of the dynasty during the revolution in 1848/1849. The Croats were mainly concerned about events and trends in Hungary, as transforming Hungary into a nation-state could not be in their interests. They also had to redefine their relationships with the other southern Slavic peoples. The Slovenians were in a similar situation, except their public political status was less favorable, and their numbers were smaller. They, too, had to find their place within the Habsburg Monarchy and Southern Slavic solidarity. Their integration efforts were directed toward uniting Slovenes living in several provinces (Carniola, Carinthia, Styria, and Hungary).

The Serbs lived in two empires at this time. Those living under Habsburg rule were in a better legal, political, and cultural position than those under the Turkish Sultan. However, apart from ecclesiastical (orthodox church) autonomy, they had no territorial autonomy; this was the purpose of Vojvodina's autonomy. However, there was a strong desire among the Servs for national unity. The formation of modern independent Serbia was intertwined with liberation from Turkish rule and the sensitive Eastern Question – from Turkish rule and the sensitive issue of political reorganization of Southern-Eastern region in the context of interests of European great powers (so-called Eastern Question). In the early 19th century, the awakening of Serbian national consciousness led to a revolt against the Turkish rule that had existed since 1492, and, at the end of the independence struggle, an independent Serbian state was established. Plans at this time focused on how to unite all Serbs into one state and on

historical models to restore Serbian statehood. Serbia's fate was also strongly influenced by the conflicts between the Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman empires. Mihailo Polit-Desancic, a Serbian statesman, believed that the conflicts between European states were triggered by their individual interests and that the search for compromise should have been a priority in the solution to the Eastern Question.[6] The Balkan nations had always been linked in some way, and he believed that confederal cooperation would have been the best way to bring the Balkan peoples together to pursue their own interests. His views were followed by Vladimir Jovanovic, who, in a study published in 1863, envisaged the Balkan peoples united under Serbian leadership.[7]

The Slovak concepts were primarily affected by the lack of an autonomous public law framework and their high degree of integration into Hungarian life. This was only tempered by the linguistic and cultural proximity of Czechs and Slovaks and the emerging pan-Slavic tendencies. In addition, the confessional (sectarian) division of Slovaks played an important role in this process and in identity-building. For a long time, the Slovak Protestants advocated Czechoslovak national unity, while the Catholics favored Slovak cultural, linguistic, and spiritual autonomy. The Slovaks thus sought to define their own identity in opposition to the Czechs on the one hand and the Hungarians on the other. Most of their plans at this time took the federal reorganization of Hungary as their starting point (1848, 1861); however, some of their ideas went beyond this framework and either sought a place for themselves within the whole of Austria or were framed in terms of various pan-Slavic constellations. These concepts have gone through different metamorphoses. One of the most prominent Slovak intellectuals, Ľudovít Štúr, for example, originally stood for the Austro-Slavic Federation, but later became one of the apostles of Russophilic Pan-Slavism. Catholic priest Ján Palárik, in contrast, was more of a believer in democratic pan-Slavism.

Like the Serbs, the Romanian national movement was strongly influenced by the fact that the Romanian nation had long lived in two empires (Habsburg and Ottoman). In addition, from the 19th century onward, a third powerful empire (Russia) also played a role in their development. For Romanians, the best place to live was not in the autonomous and then independent Romania mentioned above, but in Transylvania, a part of Hungary. However, they did not have legal status worthy of their number there. Their linguistic and cultural ties extended beyond Central Europe and made them members of the European Neolatin language community. Consequently, their main ambition for a long time was not a wider regional or European federation but unification of the Romanian lands into one state. The room for maneuvering by the Romanians, who already had an independent state in the 19th century, was, of course, unlike that of nations living as part of the larger monarchies.

The Ukrainian and Ruthenian national movements of the 19th century were influenced by motives similar to those of the Slavic peoples of Central Europe who were without independent statehood traditions. The crucial difference was that there were

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6 Polit-Desancic, 1862, p. 30.
7 Yovanovitch, 1863.

many more Ukrainians. They also lived in two empires that were not very friendly to each other. However, the conflicting interests of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Tsarist Russia also allowed Ukrainian patriots to exploit them to the Ukrainians' own advantage. It was not by chance that Galicia, under Habsburg rule, became culturally the 'Ukrainian Piedmont' and not the much larger and more populous Eastern Ukraine. Tsarism did not want to recognize the existence of an independent Ukrainian nation but thought in terms of national unity of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peoples. For the Habsburgs, who already ruled a multi-ethnic empire with a complex structure and no clear national majority, recognizing Ukrainian national independence was no longer a cardinal issue. In fact, it was all very well to provoke its large eastern neighbor. Ukrainians also had to define themselves in the coordinate system of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was not an easy process. Ultimately, however, what mattered to them was unifying Ukrainians into a state and then federalizing that state. In the circumstances at the time, they could not agree to more generous concepts.

The real pan-European issue was the Polish question. Until the end of the 18th century, the Poles had independent statehood; this was not uncommon, as the Polish-Lithuanian state was for a long time one of the largest in Europe. This made the loss of independent national statehood even more frustrating for the Polish elite. Consequently, throughout the long 19th century (i.e., between 1789 and 1914), they strove to restore it, which was no easy task since they were divided among three powerful neighboring empires (Austria, Russia, and Prussia and then Germany). In the case of 19th-century Polish political concepts, it is necessary to consider the important intellectual traditions and constant attention to Western European trends. It was never an end in and of itself, as Poles felt very clearly that their fate would be decided at a minimal European level. Specific ideas were influenced not only by important philosophical traditions, but also by the strong Christian messianism that was always present in the Polish milieu. During the Romanticism period, Poles were also touched by Slavic solidarity, but Russian pressure occurred sooner here than in the case of other—non-Orthodox—Slavic nations.

In the case of different integration concepts, it should also be considered that the influence of socialist ideas was strong, especially among Poles in Russia. Moreover, they had traditionally been open to international cooperation. The later founder of the state, József Piłsudski, came from this environment, and the nationalistic tradition was strong

The Polish political traditions and experience, their demographic weight, and diplomatic skills (see the case of Adam Czartoryski) were enough to keep the Polish question off the table of European politics, but not enough to resolve it. However, the states that annexed them could not really integrate and assimilate them either, as they were too numerous, and their national consciousness was too strong. The Poles, too, were already aware that their problems could only be solved in the next major European conflict. For them, the main issue was unifying the Polish ethnic territories, but this could not have been achieved without involving other great powers. The Poles hoped

mainly for the French but would have accepted any other help. At the same time, they had to consider the fate of the non-Polish majority areas of their once great state and their attitude toward the non-Polish population living there.

2. From the end of World War I to World War II

The victorious Entente powers formed new state units based on various interests and considerations. In some places, the national principle came to the fore, while in others, it was historical or even economic and transport aspects. The peculiarity of the post-World War I settlement was that, for the first time, a global international organization, the League of Nations, was formed, and almost all European states were members for some time.

The Paris Peace Conference established the Covenant of League of Nations, in which the parties undertook to promote peace and security. This left its mark on the ideas for the future of European states that were formulated in Austria after the break-up of the Habsburg Monarchy. Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's pan-European plan would have served both peacekeeping and economic cooperation. In addition to economic and political cooperation, there was a plan to create a cultural alliance with Britain and the Soviet Union. They also formulated a plan that would have created an alliance of European states based on the German federation established in 1815.

At the end of the First World War, the German Mitteleuropa plan was the most significant idea of an integration nature, serving primarily German economic interests. This idea also had an impact on politicians in defeated Hungary. Although the plan was also seen as a good foundation for the creating a United States of Europe, it was opposed by many throughout Europe because of Germany's world domination aspirations. After Trianon, the plans that would have helped the country's situation mainly from an economic point of view also came to the fore in Hungary. Although the Pan-European Movement reached Hungary in the late 1920s, it was unable to have a real impact due to the distance of official government policy. Thus, the era's aspirations toward a federation cannot be called real federation ideas. Their aim was not to create an alliance of states that cooperated effectively with each other to counter external (non-European) pressures, but to maintain the political status quo against each other and resolve the almost insurmountable economic difficulties arising from the status quo.[8] In addition to military cooperation, the main goal of the alliance was to make the Hungarian revision goals impossible, and at the same time, isolate Hungary's economic and foreign policies.[9]

The consolidation of the smaller Slavic peoples of the Balkans into a state formation actually took place after the First World War. The Kingdom of Serbia-Croatia-Slovenia was established first, followed by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It is true that

8 Segesváry, 2004, p. 28.
9 For more details, see Ádám, 1989, p. 193.

this coalition was not complete, because the defeated Bulgaria continued to maintain its independence, and an independent Albanian state was established in the region. However, the emergence of the South Slavic state also highlighted that conflicts between the nations involved could not be completely eliminated this way. The Serb-led state was not unified nationally, religiously, or economically, and the ethnic differences were made dramatic primarily by the Serbian and Croatian opposition. Political struggles revolved around the internal system of the state, centralism, and federalism. In the spirit of the South Slavic idea, King Alexander I wanted to end the division between nations by introducing a royal dictatorship. Truly effective unity did not materialize, and in the Second World War, the Axis powers occupied and divided Yugoslavia. The Balkan Pact was signed on February 9, 1934, with the participation of Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey. The alliance was set up mainly against Bulgaria and Italy, but its effectiveness was rather limited due to mutual mistrust.[10]

The victorious states, which were naturally better able to integrate into the existing power framework, usually pursued an ambitious foreign policy. This was particularly true of Poland, which in those years tried to act as a regional power. It was also able to make successful use of the framework provided by the League of Nations; Warsaw was able to fight for a kind of semi-permanent membership in the Executive Council of the world organization. However, it no longer had the energy to revive the larger Polish-Belorussian-Ukrainian-Lithuanian state formation, although this was an important objective at the time.

The relations between the regional victors then were greatly complicated by the tensions between the two dominant states, Czechoslovakia and Poland, which arose over territorial and border disputes. However, it would have been in the fundamental interests of these two states to cooperate, at least after Hitler came to power in Germany. In the end, Czechoslovakia was only able to implement its policy of alliance with Hungary in the southeast, when it was able to create the so-called Little Entente in 1921 with Yugoslavia and Romania.[11] The first Czechoslovak Republic was, moreover, basically interested in building an anti-German collective security system. The diplomatically very active Prague was involved in many of the fashionable initiatives of the time, but ultimately, they did not save it in 1938/1939.

Romania was one of the main territorial winners of the post-World War I settlement, as the Romanians were able to integrate almost all the territories they had claimed in the previous century into one state. Administrative centralism had more chance here, despite the presence of large national minorities. The French-based legal-administrative traditions on the one hand and the large numerical superiority of the majority nation on the other played a role in this. At the same time, Romania, in addition to revisionist Hungary, also feared the nearby Soviet Union since it was also growing at the expense of the former Russian-Ukrainian territories. This, in turn,

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10 Egeresi, 2013, p. 42.
11 Ádám, 1989, p. 112.

necessitated the search for more serious great power alliances in the western part of Europe. Paris seemed the obvious choice, but Berlin was also an option.

In the 1930s, the balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe was profoundly redrawn by Nazi Germany's active regional policy. An essential element of this was economic cooperation, in which German industrial products were to be traded for Central and Eastern European agricultural products and raw materials. In fact, only industrialized Czechoslovakia could not fit into this scheme, which made its political situation even more difficult. It was no coincidence that the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Milan Hodža (1935–1938) wanted to use the Danube region for the eruption—that is, to establish closer cooperation between the states. The existence of an independent Poland was also inherently problematic for Germany, while the Nazi German criticism toward Czechoslovakia and Poland was also ideological. The international system established in the 1920s was therefore overturned at the end of the 1930s.

The Nazi annexation of Austria, followed by the break-up of Czechoslovakia and finally the invasion of Poland, prompted the Central and Eastern European elites to seriously reassess their policy of seeking alliances. All of this reinforced the realization that the small Central European states could only preserve their peace and security by putting aside petty differences and creating political and economic unity. All this went hand in hand with the realization that creating a federation required jointly run institutions and jointly implemented political, social, and economic reforms. It was most visibly articulated by the former Czechoslovak prime minister, the Slovak-born agrarian politician Milan Hodža, in his post-World War II draft for a Central European federation, but it was too late. A new hegemon was on the horizon (the Soviet Union), which was not interested in a federation in the region.[12]

3. Soviet dominance between 1948 and 1989 and anticommunist opposition

After World War II, the idea of uniting states to preserve peace began to take shape in reality. At the first congresses for integrating Europe, very little was said about the states under the influence of the Soviet Union participating in the unity. However, at the conference on the future of Europe held in The Hague from May 7–10, 1948, Winston Churchill had already spoken about integrating Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, which he envisioned under the auspices of the United Nations. Although the practical arrangements for unity were then necessarily limited to Western Europe, the goal could not be less than that of Europe as a whole:

> It is necessary for the executive governments of the sixteen countries, associated for the purposes of the Marshall Plan, to make precise arrangements. These can apply at present only to what is called Western Europe. In this we wish them well and will give them all loyal support; but our aim here is not

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12 Segesváry, 2004, p. 31.

confined to Western Europe. We seek nothing less than all Europe. Distinguished exiles from Czechoslovakia, and almost all the Eastern European nations,[13] and also from Spain, are present among us. We aim at the eventual participation of all European peoples whose society and way of life, making all allowances for the different points of view in various countries, are not in disaccord with a Charter of Human Rights and with the sincere expression of free democracy. We welcome any country where the people own the Government, and not the Government the people.[14]

After it became clear in the 1940s and 1950s that deeper political integration was not yet a viable option even in Western Europe, the states there began to push for at least economic integration (ECSC, EURATOM, EEC), which in the longer term led to the birth of the European Union. However, the Soviet Union, which had settled in East-Central Europe for many decades, did not take a favorable view of this and regarded the federationist ideas of regional integration as reactionary concept.[15] This was all the more so because most of this ideas were born in émigré circles. However, Moscow was also not a fan of the great Balkan federation, which for a time was advocated by the communist leadership of the states there. The latter's fate was finally sealed by the Yugoslav-Soviet break-up at the end of the 1940s.

At the same time, in the region under its influence, Moscow also had to think about reconciling the deep divisions between the nations living there and new forms of integration. The latter included the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (MECA) in the economic sphere and the Warsaw Pact organization in the defense sphere. The only countries in the region not to participate in these were Yugoslavia, which was going its separate socialist ways, and Albania, which was completely isolated.

The Soviet Union also needed to reduce national tensions and the historic mistrust between its satellite states. The states in the region had not been on good terms with each other in the past. The ideology of 'proletarian internationalism' was intended to serve this aim, and its realization was made easier for a time by the fact that radical socialist movements were usually more nationally tolerant. The peoples of the region therefore had to get to know each other better, wittingly or unwittingly. This took many forms, ranging from scholarship programs to the adaptation of literary curricula. The latter also gave students the opportunity to get to know the greatest writers and major works of the neighboring fraternal peoples. The new institutions of cultural diplomacy were also active in the field of mutual acquaintance. The socialist

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13 The congress brought together about eight hundred Western European participants: politicians, church persons, craftsmen, syndicalists, economists, academics, writers, scholars, and artists. Five Romanian, five Polish, five Czechoslovakian, four Hungarian, and three Yugoslav guests appeared as observers. For more about the congress, see Bóka, 2018, pp. 1–43.

14 Address given by Winston Churchill at the Congress of Europe in The Hague (May 7, 1948). Available at http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_winston_churchill_at_the_congress_of_europe_in_the_hague_7_may_1948- en-58118da1-af22-48c0-bc88-93cda974f42c.html

15 Segesváry, 2004, p. 43.

countries set up networks of cultural and information institutes in each other's capitals. However, the various other forums for friendship and, later, workers' visits and intra-regional tourism, which began in the 1960s, should not be underestimated. All this brought with it some regional familiarization.[16]

For a while, though, the Central Europe notion and its identity became a taboo subject. For a long time, the region east of the Elbe could only be written and spoken about as Eastern Europe. Historians have stressed the common historical features and cultural roots of Russia and Eastern Europe. For a long time, it was dangerous to depart from this terminology, because it could have called into question the 'natural' geopolitical embeddedness and integration of the region in the eyes of the existing political system. There were few greater sins than questioning the Soviet Union's leadership within the 'peace camp.'

Only beginning in the late 1970s did official pressure began to ease. In Hungary, for example, more intensive Austrian-Hungarian cultural and scientific contacts were established at that time, which also brought with them more nuanced terminology. In the wake of the works of István Bibó, Iván T. Berend, Ferenc Glatz, Péter Hanák, and György Ránki, it was again possible to speak of East-Central Europe with caution. The idea of the 'milk brotherhood' of the peoples along the Danube, which was mainly associated with László Németh, also found a following among the young nationalist intelligentsia.

The idea of a Central European common identity and regional solidarity was strongly present in the intellectual opposition groups of rights defenders that had been forming since the 1970s. This was particularly true of the Czechoslovak, Polish, and Hungarian democratic opposition circles. All this was greatly influenced by the events in Poland in the early 1980s (especially the formation and struggle of the Solidarity Free Trade Union) and the activities of the Russian human rights committees (Helsinki Groups), which began after the Helsinki European Security Summit. The Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia, born in 1977, had a similar inspiration. It is true that the document did not yet speak of Central Europe, but of East and West in general, by which it did not mean geographical entities, but the two political-ideological camps.[17]

These opposition groups were strongly influenced in the 1980s by the essay on the abduction of Central Europe (Paris, 1983) by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, published in the West. Kundera conceived of Central Europe as a region out of place, suffering under Eastern Russian domination. For the inhabitants of the region, Europe was not a geographical entity but an intellectual concept that was in fact often synonymous with the West. Kundera felt that the central part of Europe, historically linked to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church, had been torn out of its natural place

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16 Glatz, 2005, p. 46.
17 http://www.totalita.cz/txt/txt_ch77_dok_1977_01_01.php

after 1945 and had become the prey of the European East (Russia or the Soviet Union). In the meantime, however, it still retained its Westernized features culturally.[18]

From an Austrian perspective, the Danube region (Donauraum) also played an important role in the discourse. Democratic Austria, which was home to many Central and Eastern European emigrants, also paid close attention to what was happening in its neighborhood and indirectly tried to help the movements there. These activities paid off after 1989. Later, the discourse on Mitteleuropa was revived in Austria in the 1970s and 1980s and also unfolded in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. This was accompanied by a renewal of the concept and a transformation of its possible interpretations. Different integration ideas and responses to conflict resolution in Central and Eastern European countries can also provide a basis for addressing the challenges facing the European Union.

4. The collapse of the communist regimes and the enlargement of the European Union (1989–2004)

After the collapse of the communist regimes, democratic elites took the lead in many states in the region, either alone or in partnership with transforming post-communist elites. Later, they repeatedly succeeded each other in power. Even before the final collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), the region began to reposition itself in foreign and geopolitical terms. The idea of a 'return to Europe' played an important role in this process. This could mean many different things. A significant part of the population thought of a Western standard of living, others of a region of freedom and the rule of law. The popular slogan also had a foreign policy message and basically opened the way to Euro-Atlantic integration. True, it was not always clear-cut, but since the nascent EU could not provide clear security guarantees, the question of EU and NATO membership became intertwined in many countries.

In the shadow of the prolonged collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in former Yugoslavia, the peaceful Central European region seemed best suited to rapid Western integration: on the one hand because of its economic development and on the other because of its political stability. This realization led to the 1991 Visegrad meeting of Czechoslovak, Polish, and Hungarian leaders, at which the Visegrad Cooperation was born. The Visegrad Group had three members at first and then four after the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Visegrad started as a loose forum for cooperation, but over time, it was given an institutional backing. Although other forms of regional cooperation in the former socialist region were established in the years after the change of regime (CEFTA, Pentagonal, then Hexagonal, GUAM somewhat further east, etc.), Visegrad cooperation has so far proved to be one of the most successful. Probably for this reason, it has survived the realization of its main goal, Euro-Atlantic integration, and is still an important player in Central European regional politics and in the EU's

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18 Brix, 2005, pp. 271–272.

internal discourse. Incidentally, not only are the Visegrad states now integrated into the EU, but all the states discussed here, except Serbia and Ukraine, which again results in a different situation in regional policy.

One of the important advantages of the Visegrad cooperation is that there are many lukewarm supporters of this formation in the individual states and very few radical principled opponents. Indeed, over time, it has begun to enjoy a broad consensus that, for the time, seems to be independent of domestic political battles. It would be good if this remained so in the future. Visegrad has gradually become an active shaper of EU processes, which of course also leads, or could lead, to conflicts from time to time.

Over the past two hundred years, the elites of the national movements in Eastern and Central Europe have formulated different concepts of European and/or wider regional unity. Some of them were ambitious pan-European plans, but most of them were more regional in scope. Often, the idea behind them was to unite against a regional hegemon, but some federative plans sought to ease the national tensions that were always present in the region. Constant ethnic unrest and vulnerability to the great powers is one of the main characteristics of the region. This is what the EU project has tried and is trying to alleviate, hopefully successfully.

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