

Between Central Europe and Europe (Slovenians and European concepts)

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ABSTRACT

In the case of the Slovenians, it is difficult to discuss elaborate European concept at various levels before the last quarter of the 20th century. As a rule, these concepts represented a summary or imitation of others that circulated in the European territory. Even if the Slovenians did not actively contribute to the development of European political concepts, they nevertheless learned about them and recognised themselves in them (or not). Perhaps they did not conceive Europe as an idea, but they certainly lived it. They reflected upon Europe during a period of profound turning points and a geostrategic vacuum. The idea that integration into a supranational community was necessary to ensure smooth national development, while maintaining an open economy would enable the internationalisation of the economy to achieve greater scale, was a historical constant.

KEYWORDS

Slovenia, Europe, Central Europe, European concepts, European integration, national ideology

Introduction

The awareness that Slovenians belonged in Europe was already present among the intellectuals and political public in the 19th century. It could not have been otherwise, as until 1918, Slovenians were governed by the Habsburg Monarchy, which was the epitome or an indispensable part of Central Europe and an important political and military power with grand ambitions to become a decisive European player. With the rise of print and literacy, as a political or geographical space, Europe was deeply embedded in the consciousness of the population, particularly due to the geography and history lessons taught in schools. Certain individuals clearly emphasised the awareness of the European character. Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819), one of the founders of the Slovenian national movement,¹ placed a part of Slovenia at the centre of Europe – the part that was also included in the Illyrian

1 Kos and Toporišič, 2013.

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provinces. The Illyrian provinces were a political-territorial unit established by the Napoleonic occupying powers. Illyria or the Illyrian provinces can be understood in different ways, but each interpretation also includes the Slovenian parts. Vodnik viewed this entity as an excellent opportunity for development, and even a cultural rebirth, as the French authorities allowed the use of the Slovenian language. He was also personally engaged in the process as a grammar school teacher and school supervisor, and he was also a poet. His words, in free translation, in the poem ‘Illyria Reborn’ were unequivocal.²

*At the head of Greece
Corinth stands,
Illyria in the heart
of Europe lies.*

*Corinth was
Hellenic eye.
Illyria the ring
of Europe will be.*

Vodnik’s words were naively elated in a moment of great enthusiasm, or a spark of poetic inspiration. However, they were also of uncritical pretentiousness, which is why they did not make much of an impact, although, the idea of Slovenia’s central position in Europe survived. Occasionally, during pivotal events, while reflecting on the potential future, the idea of Slovenia at the heart of Europe was reaffirmed – not only in the cultural and political sense but also in terms of transport and economy. Simultaneously, we should not overlook the awareness, already present since the 19th century, that Slovenia – although located on the periphery of the prevailing economic and social processes – was a part of Europe. This ambitious viewpoint was rare, as the national question became more prominent. The Slovenian national question involved the struggle for the equal development of language and culture and was becoming the driving force of the national (nationalist) movement. The focus of the elites shifted explicitly to the Habsburg Monarchy or, even more narrowly, to the regional level. The period of national rebirth affirmed Slovenians as a distinct ethnic entity and Slovenia as a geographical territory inhabited by Slovenians. Consequently, during the second half of the 19th century, efforts were made to nationalise the population.

In the context of the Habsburg Empire, the Slovenians’ relative political influence as a community was modest, while the focus on the Monarchy’s regional or even local contexts narrowed the view. There was hardly any reflection on Europe as a whole. The complexity of the relations within the Habsburg Monarchy itself called for a great deal of intellectual attention. The perception of threat to the

| 2 Vodnik, 1988. |

Slovenian nation and the fear of assimilation – of drowning in the ‘German sea’ – further limited the view. However, the situation changed after World War I. In Yugoslavia, Slovenians, as a constitutive element of the new state, (partly) lost their fear of assimilation. The Yugoslav state framework enabled political, cultural, and economic development based on Slovenian identity. Simultaneously, the interwar period – with the pan-European idea gaining broader support in Slovenia – was also a time when Europe was unsuccessfully attempting to gain a new balance in the aftermath of World War I. These events also prompted the reflections on Slovenians in European contexts, especially the issue of Central Europe.

Under the communist regime, ideas of Europe manifested themselves in the dichotomy between Europe’s East and West, i.e. in the Cold War division and the Yugoslav policy of non-alignment. With the political liberalisation of the communist regime in the second half of the 1980s, the European dimension re-entered the intellectual space, featuring two different aspects, defined by the political narrative as the two faces of ‘Europeanisation’. On the one hand, the focus was on the popularisation of the cultural and historical concept of Central Europe, according to which Slovenians represented an integral part of Europe. On the other hand, the process of ‘Europeanisation’ also included the transitional period. During this process, the concept of Europe became narrower, and was reduced to the European Union. ‘Europeanisation’ meant joining the Euro-Atlantic integrations. The entire process of this transition (Europeanisation) served several objectives. The first and most important was the institutional alignment of the state, society, and economy with the Western European countries. During the second stage, that is once the ‘Europeanisation’ was complete, the integration into the European Union was to follow. This integration into the Western international structures became a common goal of the political elites, and also enjoyed large-scale public support. The accession to the European Union would safeguard democratic development and encourage economic progress in the long term, thanks to the stable and predictable democratic environment. Meanwhile, joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Pact would provide long-term security.³

This article does not aim to present the issue of the perception of Europe or the concepts of Europe as an idea in detail and in the entire historical arc of the 20th century – instead, its aim is much more modest. The focus is on the individual concepts contextualised with regard to the time of their emergence. Each concept in itself is just a minor intellectual episode, a snippet of documented time, especially if we consider the Slovenian territory from the European perspective. However, despite their episodic character, the concepts collectively illustrate the historical conditionality, continuities, and discontinuities of the reflections about Europe throughout the 20th century, as well as the national question in the Slovenian intellectual arena. The article presents a stream of thought about Europe in four chapters. The first focuses on the presentation of the prevailing ideas, Pan- and Central

3 Lazarević, 2022, pp. 137–155.

Europe that shaped broader intellectual environment. However, some exceptions are also presented, in the form of thoughts from the margins of social space that have not found broader resonance. Then, three concepts and their authors are presented: the European Federation (Edvard Kocbek), Intermarium (Lambert Ehrlich) and European Union (France Bučar). Each of the three concepts represents a particular time and intellectual environment. Edvard Kocbek the interwar period, Lambert Ehrlich the period of the Second World War and France Bučar the period of transition, just before the accession to the European Union in 2004.

1. Ideas and backgrounds in 20th Century

The interwar period is vital for the conceptualisation of Europe because a new reality emerged during that time. The dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy and the emergence of new states fundamentally altered the situation in Central Europe, as well as in Europe as a whole. The apparent stability of the period before World War I had vanished. The war completely changed the contemporary horizons of thought. While it upset the previous balances in Europe (political, social, and economic), it also failed to resolve the accumulated contradictions or provide a new, undisputedly functional European system. At the international politics level, the peace treaties established the framework for international cooperation, but the new geopolitical order did not function well. With the Great Depression, the instability of the 1920s extended into the 1930s.

However, instability was not only experienced in the European area, but was felt by Slovenians the Yugoslav state as well. This new state, created in 1918 out of the idealism of some (the Slovenian and Croatian elites) and the triumph of others (the Serbian elite), had only been gradually consolidated. It attempted to find its footing in the international arena, oscillating between the new circumstances and traditional international political patterns. The Yugoslav space was narrower than that of the Habsburg Monarchy, which is why the European (global) world appeared bigger. As a new situation was emerging, it intertwined with the old one; we can speak of continuity in a time of discontinuity. While the former state – the Habsburg Monarchy – was gone, it was still very much alive in the regulation of everyday private, social and economic life. In many ways, it still defined people's ways of thinking. The socialisation of the elites in the intellectual environment of the Habsburg Monarchy could not be ignored in the context of the Yugoslav state.

The momentous nature of the times was also reflected in the people's perceptions, and as a result, Europe was given somewhat more thought. Ivan Šušteršič – one of the most important Slovenian politicians, who could not perceive the end of the Habsburg Monarchy – devised a backup plan. In October 1918, he imagined that a new state formation, the Danubian Union (a confederation), would be created in the Danube region by transforming the Monarchy. This Union would encompass the territories of Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Ukraine and Romania.

The loose federation would be governed by a Federal Council, based on the organisation of the Swiss model, while its members would enjoy extensive competences. The Union would function as a single market, with the customs and monetary union as the cornerstone of cooperation. Šušteršič also allowed for a common foreign policy. The Union would have a common symbolic representative/president, originating from the House of Habsburg but whose powers would be predominantly ceremonial. Later, the idea of a Danube confederation was further developed by others – without any connection to the Habsburgs but with a clear intention. In the territory between Germany and the Soviet Union, a strong state would need to be created, in order to neutralise both threats to the stability of Central Europe.⁴

Šušteršič's idea was, in fact, not overly bold: it was predictable, considering that he desired to preserve the Habsburg Monarchy in some form. His deliberations adhered to the old patterns. While most people were still oriented towards the national sphere, and some also towards the European one, rare exceptions viewed the world through a global perspective. Vinko Šarabon, a grammar school geography teacher,⁵ began to imagine an 'imperial' Yugoslavia with colonies in the Middle East. This, however, was not some humorous scheme but a rather serious argumentation, which also gained weight because of its publication in three parts on the front page of the most widely circulated newspaper. Šarabon's deliberation confirms how difficult it is to change the thought patterns – how people continue to think according to the established patterns even during and after ruptures. They think in patterns where the future is merely supposed to be an extension of the present rather than an independent and separate temporal entity. From a kinder point of view, Šarabon's idea can also be seen as an attempt to imagine the world beyond the more or less impenetrable fences of Slovenia – and even beyond Central Europe, in the context of the entire world. Alternatively, we can simply take it as a bad joke, which is precisely what his contemporaries did.

Šarabon built on the premise that before World War I, Syria had been promised to Austria, had the European powers divided the territory of the Ottoman Empire among themselves. As a successor state, Yugoslavia would therefore have to follow the Habsburg Monarchy in its colonial ambitions, thereby showing its will to power. This was supposed to separate great nations from others. Yugoslavia was a medium-sized country and thus on the threshold that determined whether it would find itself among the rulers or the ruled:

The great countries will decide the fate of the independent nations, and why should Yugoslavia not take part in that decision? This is not imperialism – it is only a natural demand of a nation that has risen from the narrow confines of continentalism to the threshold of world politics.⁶

4 Rahten, 2009, pp. 23–24.

5 Kranjec, 2013.

6 Šarabon, 1919a, p. 1.

The country's coastal location was supposed to be a natural catalyst for the colonial mission. The sea offered a glance beyond the continent and encouraged an ambitious journey into the wide world. Colonies were the logical next step. *'The way over the sea – towards greater prosperity, cultural goods, and progress in general – imposes itself on us if we have to venture out there, if we have our own colonies.'*⁷

In the manner of a typical colonial and racist discourse, Šarabon had two compelling reasons to colonise Syria. The first was economic. In order to expand, the domestic industry urgently needed an additional market and, of course, raw materials. Syria would serve this purpose perfectly. The second reason was civilisational. Šarabon held that culture should be brought to the people of Syria 'because the Turks have destroyed everything'. As he writes: *'Wake up and do not miss this opportunity! For true colonisation is not conquest or oppression, but only a spread of culture, a fruitful accumulation of our mental and material capital, beneficial for us as well as for the inhabitants of the colonies.'*⁸

While this article did not prompt any reactions, it appears that privately voiced criticism reached the author, considering that he wrote two more sequels to vindicate his views. In these follow-up articles, he attempted to use a different approach to explain his original thesis on the necessity of colonies for Yugoslavia, but failed to find a sympathetic ear. He never really expected any understanding from the common people. However, as he only managed to provoke ridicule in political and intellectual circles, he wrote: *'This is not some silly joke, nor a grotesque parody.'*⁹ Šarabon was extremely serious, but the irony and mockery stopped any further reflections on colonial adventures.¹⁰

In terms of long-term characteristics, we can also point out Črtomir Nagode's way of thinking about Europe. His example shows that it is possible to think about reality and Europe entirely differently, if we shift the focus of observation. Once people had transcended the political level, new and different perspectives revealed themselves. The integration of transport was undoubtedly one such issue. Although Slovenian intellectuals ignored this topic in their discussions, Nagode was a construction expert and politician.¹¹ He was keenly interested in economic development issues, especially those related to transport and the subsequent economic integration. He studied traffic flows from both geopolitical and geographic perspectives. The centrality of the Slovenian territory as a crossroads of European transport routes was evident in his work. According to Nagode, it was precisely this intersection of transport routes that – due to the need for the central location's economisation – also dictated the Slovenian integration into the broader European area. Nagode's starting point was that *'Yugoslav territory, with its sea, rivers, and*

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Šarabon, 1919b, p. 1.

10 Lazarević, 2021, pp. 101–134.

11 Enciklopedija Slovenije, 1993, p. 270.

*open plains, is attached to its neighbourhood, both in Central Europe and the Balkans. Geographically, it forms a gateway between two worlds.*¹²

He based his arguments on national needs, which had to be balanced against ‘the interests of the wider world’, as he wrote, taking into account the region’s geographical features. From the geographical point of view, he noted the Slovenian openness towards the Pannonian world and thus to Eastern and Northern Europe, as well as, on the other end, the passage towards Italy and thus further west and along the Danube into the Black Sea territory. These natural features also determined the traffic flows, which Nagode studied from the perspective of freight and passenger traffic. Traffic flows also dictated economic cooperation and created a single economic space. From the Slovenian (Yugoslav) area standpoint, this space was primarily Central Europe as well as the broader European area due to its connectedness. Nagode’s argument was as follows:

The territory of our country and transport in its neighbourhood transcend the axes of small traffic resistance. The lines link areas with very different potentials, both in terms of natural conditions and the level of their economies. This difference, which is a condition for the exchange of economic goods, is also capable of generating strong economic flows along these lines.¹³

Other scholars reflected on the widespread thesis of Europe’s gradual decline or its crisis as such. Because of the instability, many had the impression that Europe, as a cultural-political or socio-economic entity, was crumbling or even facing collapse. The instability of democratic institutions and the emergence of extremes (fascism/Nazism or communism), which, (especially) in the 1930s, promised a quick and easy solution to all social problems at the national and international levels, raised numerous doubts about the vitality of the European spirit or ‘European soul’. In this context, Franc Terseglav defended the idea of Europe and its capacity for regeneration.¹⁴ During the interwar period, Terseglav also spent several years working as the editor of the most widely circulated newspaper in Slovenia, which had a Catholic background. He saw Europe as a place of conflicting interests, yet not in decline or even facing imminent collapse. According to him, the conflict of interests was not a path of destruction but rather of finding compromises, a new synthesis that would allow the crisis to be overcome.

The soul of Europe will be best understood if we consider it from the viewpoint of the principle that it is, in the true sense, a *complexio oppositorum* – i.e., that all European history from its earliest beginnings as far

12 Nagode, 1938, pp. 306–323.

13 Nagode, 1938, pp. 306–323.

14 Vodnik, 2013.

back as we can trace them has been a constant struggle between the most extreme opposites of thinking, feeling, and acting in such a way that it never, in any age, reaches a permanent state of peace between its various polar aspirations. Instead, each period when Europe seemingly calms down in some ultimate ideal of culture and social order, in which Europeans seem to have settled down in at least some modicum of synthesis and to have found the final solutions for their existence and the meaning of their actions, is once again only an embryo of a new development into its opposite. Such periods are comparatively very short, so that each century usually represents, in a certain sense, a greater or lesser break with the previous one and simultaneously a new and more fruitful era. Therefore, the Enlightenment hypothesis, which saw European cultural history as continuously developing from a lower level to ever higher ones, is just as wrong as the opposite hypothesis of decay ending in total disintegration, which is nowadays justified by many with various scientific devices, while in reality, it only represents a scholarly reflection of the apocalyptic popular mood in the face of the upsetting, incomprehensible, and endless upheavals, expressed in the common people's 'premonitions' or prophecies of the imminent end of the world [...] This peculiarly consistent process of Europe's historical development would not, of course, in itself serve as proof that we could not (to use an example from the world of physics) eventually get stuck at some middle point from which we could no longer move forward, either to the right or to the left, and our culture would become petrified like, for example, the Chinese, or that we could not swing so far to one of the two opposite poles that our civilisation would dissolve into the chaos of complete lawlessness in the spiritual, moral, political, and economical sense. Although we cannot categorically deny this possibility, we can nevertheless conclude, with a very high degree of probability, that the European cultural development in all its diversity, elaborate drama, and positive creation of a myriad of values will not come to an end so soon. Our European cultural history, with its Christian background, is still young, comparatively – we know of epochs of human civilisations like the Egyptian, Sumerian-Babylonian, Chinese, or Toltec-Aztec, which lasted four, five thousand years or more. Compared to the crises that Europe has already gone through, the difficulties we face today are not as insurmountable as they naturally appear to those directly affected. In the past, we have seen even worse, and people behaved in a similar way as today. One need only to think of the spiritual divisions, the political struggles between the Church and the state, and the bloody disputes between European countries at the end of the early Middle Ages; the extremely tense social relations of that period, culminating in revolutions and total anarchy; the time of the Papal Schism; the extreme contradictions of philosophical schools, moral outlooks and trends from the crudest materialism and pantheism to the

most destructive spiritualism; and finally the terrible woes of the Thirty Years' War, especially the period from the 14th to the middle of the 17th century, when it often looked as if the life of Christian Europe would end in blood and fire, and yet we would only see an even greater improvement in every sphere of life after that.¹⁵

2. Pan-European idea

During the interwar period, support for the pan-European movement was widespread. The pan-European idea could be understood as a synthesis of European extremes, as defined by Terseglav. Slovenia's geopolitical position after World War I, which dictated the deliberations about Europe, must also be considered. Following the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Slovenian ethnic territory was divided among four states. Most of it was incorporated into Yugoslavia, with parts in the west going to Italy, those the north to Austria, and a small part in the east to Hungary. However, Yugoslavia was the only state that did not deny Slovenians their own identity. The division of the ethnic territory between four states spread the impression of geopolitical disorder among the elites, triggering elements of the victimhood nationalism phenomenon.¹⁶ The realisation was more than clear. The solution to the Slovenian national question could only be reached through regional or European integration, which should necessarily take into account Slovenians' independent identity. Unsurprisingly, integration initiatives were generally well received by the public. However, the question of whether to integrate within Yugoslavia or beyond it in the form of an independent Slovenia remained crucial. For decades, the issue had been more hypothetical than practical. However, during the crisis and disintegration of the Yugoslav state in the 1980s, when the scales tipped in favour of Slovenia's independent access to international integrations without the Yugoslav burden, this issue gained topicality. During the interwar period, these dilemmas did not exist, and the belief in the Yugoslav idea and state was strong. There was also a clear view that integrations made sense and had legitimacy as long as they allowed the Slovenian identity to develop without obstacles.

The pan-European concept satisfied these fundamental aspirations. The idea of Pan-Europa was general enough to address the problems of small nations, and was thus widely supported. In Slovenia, the concept of Pan-Europa was given the necessary public legitimacy by Anton Korošec when he attended the Pan-European Congress in 1926. As the most important Slovenian politician in the interwar period, Korošec was also influential in the central government bodies in

15 Terseglav, 1936, pp. 85–88.

16 Lim, 2010, pp. 138–162.

Belgrade. A pan-European committee was established that operated in Slovenia and, after initial reluctance, at the state level as well.¹⁷ The pan-European concept could represent a framework that would allow for the unification of Slovenians within a single entity, while simultaneously ensuring enough autonomy for the development of Slovenians as an ethnic community. The concept of Pan-Europa was acceptable because it allowed Slovenia to transcend its division between four states. Simply put, its supporters were convinced that the (re)integration of the Slovenian ethnic territory was only possible through the integration of Europe. *'For us, Pan-Europa is the definitive solution to the minority question'*, wrote Andrej Gosar.¹⁸ Gosar was a Christian Socialist by political orientation, active in politics in the interwar period; after World War II, he focused on his academic career.¹⁹ He wholeheartedly welcomed the pan-European initiative and was also a member of its national committee. He adopted the idea of Pan-Europa, advocated for it publicly, and wrote a series of articles popularising the idea. However, Gosar was not always in tune with the initiator of the Pan-Europa concept: he was not entirely convinced by Kalergi's attitude towards Russia. Instead, he sought more flexibility, especially for the Slavic nations. Gosar saw Europe as 'the child of the Paris Peace Treaties'. He believed that certain borders were meant to be permanent and considered any attempts to alter them as extremely dangerous and a threat to peace. The immutability of borders was supposed to encourage European cooperation.²⁰

3. Central Europe as utopia

In addition to the pan-European concept, the idea of Central Europe was also notable during the interwar period. The concept of Central Europe was not a new one. In fact, from the Slovenian point of view, it had been, equated with the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy during the period prior to World War I. There was no sympathy for Germany as a part of Central Europe.²¹ The world of the Habsburg Monarchy was a space, both geographical and spiritual, which the intellectual gaze from Slovenia could easily master and identify with. Discussions about Central Europe had already been taking place in the years leading up to World War I. The Central European territory was perceived as an assortment of various nations strongly influenced by the German cultural heritage, and simultaneously, a place of conflict due to the region's considerable diversity and Germany's political and economic expansion. With the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, this single area disintegrated, and the economic and cultural ties were severed. While a lot changed

17 Rahten, 2009, pp. 23–26.

18 Gosar, 1926, p. 2.

19 Enciklopedija Slovenije, 1989, p. 320.

20 Kaučič, 2019, pp. 36–56.

21 Pančur, 2006, pp. 23–35.

following the end of the war, not many changes occurred in the short term, as the connections were still maintained for quite some time due to inertia. Meanwhile, the effect of the Great Depression was divisive. On the one hand, it involved the severance of economic ties, retreat to the barriers of protectionism, and tendency to isolate oneself within one's borders. On the other hand, during the second half of the 1930s, Central Europe was once again confronted with Germany's political and economic expansion.²²

The idea of Central Europe was a constant on the Slovenian intellectual horizon. During the post-World War II era, the focus shifted away from Europe (somewhat) due to the non-alignment policy. However, in the 1980s, the Slovenian gaze was once again fixed on Europe, more precisely on Central Europe, Slovenia's natural hinterland. Milan Kundera's famous essay on the tragedy of Central Europe²³ also resonated in Slovenia, especially among culture professionals and historians. As a concept, Central Europe involved a common historical heritage, a link between the European East and West. Another aspect, particularly vital during the 1980s, was also present: this was the time of the failing communist regime. It was time for the transformation of the Slovenian identity. The concept of Central Europe as the eastern part of Western Europe was highly convenient because it allowed a new identity to be anchored in the historical context at the end of the communist regime.

In 1987, Drago Jančar, a leading Slovenian writer, wrote:

For small Central European nations like Slovenians as well as for various minorities, the vision of Central Europe has also revealed itself as an opportunity to break out of the isolation that we pursue just as stubbornly as others are forcing us into it. In the ideological, national, and even creative sense, Central Europe has become synonymous with empowerment, potential, and hope – in short: a utopia.²⁴

A few years later, Jančar went on to question whether the concept of Central Europe could be idealised. In response, he once again presented the national and international moments of the Central European status.

As long as this topic was pushed from our consciousness and almost forbidden, idealisations were probably normal. The politically, economically, militarily, and culturally divided Europe was not a natural state of affairs: it had not emerged due to the will of the people who had lived and still live here. Instead, it resulted from voluntarist ideas and utopian social beliefs:

22 Teichova, 1988.

23 Kundera, 1984, pp. 33–38.

24 Jančar, 1999, p. 34.

its division was caused by the situation established by the interest and ideological centres outside it.²⁵

As the Central European countries embarked on the path of transition following the end of the communist regime, the idealism of the conceptions concerning Central Europe confronted reality. Jančar pointed out that heritage was twofold. Central Europe could be a place of harmonious diversity and creativity as well as intolerance, exclusion, and even violence. These two sides of the same geographical area would need to be reckoned with, even in the European future.

After the violent changes in Eastern Europe – at the very moment when we are facing a different Europe, one where the walls and borders have been torn down – it seems that the realisation of the utopia is close at hand. This is why now is also the right time to recognise the imminent utopia as a reality. Naturally, Central Europe as a reality rather than a fictional utopia envisioned by writers is something other than an ideal world of cultural differences that respect each other and establish an old-new unity on such ideal foundations. It is merely reality, and in it, life is as it is, even with its mutually exclusive interests and all the problems and questions that were already familiar once and which made life anything other than a state of ideal harmony.²⁶

If, according to Jančar, writers attained their utopia with the conceptualisation of Central Europe, historians remained much more realistic. Considering the numerous discussions about Central Europe that took place in 1990, the eminent historian Bogo Grafenauer simply asked why Slovenians kept deliberating on Central Europe instead of Europe as a whole. Grafenauer had a long memory, and had already written about European problems as a young historian and committed intellectual, even before World War II. In light of the European common cultural foundations, he drew attention to Europe's various definitions– to the diversity of the processes and realities that had placed individual nations in different positions in the past. He expected that the situation could not be any different in the future, concluding:

For this reason, only Europe – a Europe of nations, humanism and freedom – can be our true, well-founded vision. Of course, this is why Europe must also mature, as a Europe divided into blocs is only capable of establishing partial connections rather than ensuring an integral Europe of nations.²⁷

25 Ibid. p. 43.

26 Ibid. p. 44.

27 Grafenauer, 1991, pp. 15–26.

Peter Vodopivec was among the historians who confronted the writers' utopia with historical reality. He closely examined Central Europe's origins and historical conceptual manifestations as geopolitical conceptions. He simultaneously followed the cultural concepts of Central Europe as a single intellectual space. Vodopivec convincingly underlined the diversity of the perceptions of Central Europe, pointing out that it was difficult to talk about Europe in the categorical terms of its Western, Central, and Eastern parts. However, based on an analysis of the extensive relevant materials, he established that Central Europe was not just an '*idea or an ideological construct*' but also a concrete historical reality with its own dynamics and specific path towards modernity, which was characteristic of most Central European nations and countries. He concluded his deliberations with the encouraging thought that

despite these extremely negative experiences of nationalistic intolerance, anti-Semitism, and political authoritarianism, Central Europe and its nations are also entering the 21st century with a positive legacy of federalism, noble cultural creativity, and persistent tendency to recognise multiculturalism and multinationality as a quality and a value, which clearly shows that Central Europe was not just a dead end and a place of recurrent tragedies, as Milan Kundera believed.²⁸

By problematising the cultural conception of Central Europe during the 1980s, historians also considered broader issues – not only pertaining to the past, but also the future. They raised the question of how Europe could be perceived as an idea, and the territory of the European Union, which they desired Slovenia to join. Bogomir Novak thus ambitiously defined the Slovenian position and notion of Europe as a place of diversity and unity, presenting an opportunity for Slovenia in unambiguous words:

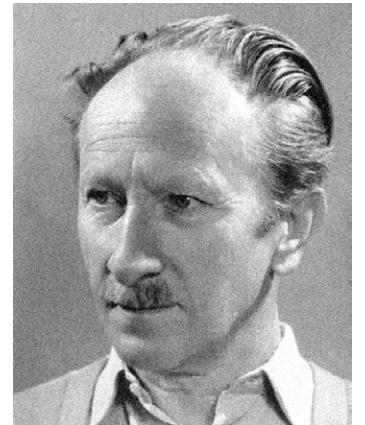
The question is to what extent Europe needs an independent Slovenia, as there is no doubt that Slovenia needs Europe. We contemplate Europe in terms of our independence while simultaneously considering the possibility of our inclusion in it. We think about Europe from the viewpoint of cultural and civilisational pluralism rather than in terms of the monopoly interests of either military bloc. Our non-alignment policy predominantly steered us towards cooperation with non-European developing countries. It seemed that we had thus overcome the spirit of Europe's bloc division as well as whatever shaped it. However, our supposed advantage has turned out to be a shortcoming. It has become apparent that in this manner, we are getting increasingly isolated and starting to lag behind the developed world. We only became aware of this

| 28 Vodopivec, 2003, pp. 7–18. |

fact once Europe ceased to be a place of the closed Cold War ideologies. Nowadays, Europe is a synthesis of several paradigms: Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, industrial-mechanistic, eco-entropic, or postmodern-informational. Based on its history, we can imagine Europe's future as a continuous discontinuity of historical possibilities. Europe has evolved through various metamorphoses, and thus its identity is not above these metamorphoses but rather within them. Europe can understand its history to the limits of its own contradictions between war and peace, development and underdevelopment, subordination and domination, nation-states and stateless nations, enforcement and violation of human rights, monopolism, and pluralism of interests, etc.²⁹

4. Edvard Kocbek (1904–1981)³⁰ and the concept of Central Europe

In 1940, when the war had already engulfed the European continent, and questions were being raised about the state of the world following the end of the war, Edvard Kocbek offered a modest outline of a possible answer. Kocbek was a highly educated young philosopher, thinker and poet. He had studied the French language, culture and literature, and was a young, socially oriented Catholic. He became known and respected in the intellectual community through his article on the Spanish Civil War, in which he critically questioned the role of the Spanish Catholic Church. During World War II he played a leading role in the resistance movement, but was completely ousted by the new communist rulers after the war.³¹



According to Kocbek, Central Europe was a special and original area between the European East and West, where at least fifteen different nations lived. It was precisely this territory's ethnic and cultural diversity that had been the misfortune of the Central European nations, and their inability and failure to assert this

²⁹ Novak, 1991, pp. 1114–1117.

³⁰ Edvard Kocbek, Slovenian poet, writer, essayist, translator, This image is available from the Digital Library of Slovenia under the reference number C7J5MK5K, public domain, source of the picture: https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edvard_Kocbek#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Kocbek.jpg.

³¹ Enciklopedija Slovenije, 1991, pp. 172–174.

diversity as a value in the broader European context. On the contrary, due to their fragmentation, they had become '*the sphere of various imperialisms and a constant focus of international tensions and conflicts*', as '*major international conflicts*' were allegedly triggered precisely on Central European soil.³²

Kocbek perceived the fundamental problem of Central Europe in two contradictory principles: the opposing principles of unconditional national sovereignty and; the internationalisation of economic cooperation. Unconditional national sovereignty led to a '*partial withdrawal*' of the countries from the (Central European) world, towards protectionism and, in the 1930s, even towards aspirations for autarky. This aspiration was opposed by the tendency to increase the economies of scale, which could only be achieved through the intense internationalisation of the national economies. In the manner of a synthesis, which Terseglav emphasised as a fundamental agent of European history, Kocbek attempted to bridge the two principles – the two tendencies of the Central European development in interwar period – and bring them closer together. He deliberated on the manner in which to overcome the economic disintegration of the Central European area, while preserving the principles of national sovereignty in each nation's cultural development. He saw a solution in a kind of Central European federation that would permit the synergy of economic activities through the free movement of goods and capital. Furthermore, such a federation would ensure that its constituents enjoyed the necessary autonomy to preserve their own culture and identity. It would depend on a partial relinquishment or transfer of the participating nations' sovereignty in the economic and political spheres to the federation.

The Central European question nevertheless needs to be solved by establishing a federation in this territory. [...] The German – that is to say, European – issue must be resolved first so that a proper path towards economic equilibrium can be opened up for Germany. However, we would be very mistaken if we thought that the question of Central Europe could be solved by the mere cessation of imperialist influences over its nations. Quite the opposite: the cultural, political, and economic reality of Central Europe has, under negative influences, developed such an incoherent nature that it strives, already of its own accord, for an original, unique solution to an entire series of questions – above all, for a balance between the cultural-political nature of its individual nations and its overall economic organisation. The Central European problem cannot be solved by keeping a lid on it as Austria-Hungary tried to do, nor by giving it a sophisticated form of political sovereignty as Versailles did, but by reducing all of the political problems to a separate resolution of the cultural and economic questions.

32 Vodopivec, 2003, p. 8.

Central Europe's strongest disparity originates from the friction between cultural and economic fulfilment. In terms of its basic functioning, the economy cannot be restricted by the national and state borders but must follow its own rules, which are spreading ever more outward. On the other hand, neither cultural creativity nor national consciousness can depend on economic power and form. Instead, their fulfilment must be legally protected. Thus, on the one hand, we are talking about a transport, customs, and financial union of the entire Central European territory, while on the other hand, we must keep in mind the precisely defined national autonomies. Thus, we can imagine two sorts of collective hierarchies: one summarising the economic life and the other the national communities. Both are only possible after a prior restriction of state sovereignties because it is clear that the principle of absolute territorial sovereignty is the most dangerous expression of today's purely political international outlook. Such a synthesis of economic and cultural freedom, secured by law, will also be the best guarantee for the creation of a new social structure.³³

Kocbek's idea was still in its rudimentary form, and had not been fully thought out; it was more of an outline than a realistic plan. However, such an idea does attest to the author's ability to visualise the broader context and think beyond the limitations of his own nation and the Yugoslav state. It was a product of the current and past times, of was influenced by the ideas of Pan-Europa as well as the United States of Europe. Peter Vodopivec stated that Kocbek's idea resembled the principles of the former Austro-Marxists.³⁴ Kocbek restricted his deliberations to Central Europe, an area close to his heart, where the disintegration processes were strongly felt. He formulated the basic principle of the Slovenian outlook on the European integration processes: to ensure smooth national development by relinquishing or transferring a part of one's sovereignty to a supranational community, while enabling the internationalisation of the economy in order to achieve a greater scale through an open economy. A small national space implementing protectionist policies would be unable to deliver such results. With this emphasis, Kocbek was far ahead of his contemporaries, who paid more attention to the political and cultural aspects while neglecting, if not outright ignoring, the significance of the economic sphere for the national community's harmonious development.

33 Kocbek, 1940, pp. 89–92.

34 Vodopivec, 2003, p. 8.

5. Lambert Ehrlich (1878–1942)³⁵ and a nation in the middle of Europe

The outbreak of World War II severely disrupted everyday life in Slovenia. It radically changed the situation of a nation divided between four countries. With the onset of the war, the central part of the country was also occupied and divided further. Italy, Germany, Hungary, and even the Independent State of Croatia occupied the territory that had previously been a part of Yugoslavia. The territory was annexed, and population was subjected to a violent assimilation policy. The occupiers refused to recognise the Slovenian identity, implementing brutal measures to suppress the same. The tools employed to eliminate the Slovenian



ethnic identity included territorial annexations, forced emigration or expulsion of undesirables, internment in concentration camps, and extreme repression (military-police and racist-administrative). The occupiers only differed in terms of their dynamics. While the German and Hungarian occupiers wished to eliminate Slovenian subjectivity as quickly as possible, the Italians were somewhat more restrained. They shared the same goals, but intended to achieve them in a somewhat longer term.

In such circumstances, when the very existence of the Slovenian nation was uncertain, the question was where Slovenia belonged and what would happen to it after the war. What sort of state organisation mechanisms could be implemented to protect and enable the development of the Slovenian ethnic identity? The Communist Party, which was at the forefront of the resistance movement, offered the concept of proletarian revolution and a Yugoslav state-legal framework closely associated with the Soviet Union. However, because of the proletarian revolution, such a concept was difficult to accept if it was not outright rejected by political and public majority.

Therefore, other ways to achieve this were sought. Several rough ideas were presented, but none were sufficiently developed.³⁶ They shared the lack of the proper momentum to assert themselves in the international public. However, one of these concepts stood out, and was considered possible to introduce to the

35 Lambert Ehrlich, Slovenian Roman Catholic priest, political figure, and ethnologist, Unknown author – This image is available from the Digital Library of Slovenia under the reference number 1U1TTJEG, public domain, source of the picture: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambert_Ehrlich#/media/File:Lambert_Ehrlich_by_1942.jpg.

36 Godeša, 2004, pp. 335–354.

international community. This was a project that placed the Slovenian territory at the centre of Europe, and was outlined by Lambert Ehrlich, a priest and university professor who was also a member of the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. Ehrlich was very influential in the Catholic Church network, and among the students at the University of Ljubljana. He was accused by the communists of organising military collaboration in the part of Slovenia occupied by the Italians and liquidated in 1942.³⁷ His way of thinking was more ambitious. As early as 1941, in a special study titled *The Slovenian Question*, Ehrlich had conceived of a framework for the post-war regime in Central Europe. He managed to deliver his plan to the Western countries – the United Kingdom and the United States – as an example. The concept was ambitious, but in fact unrealistic, as it interfered too radically with the European geostrategic order. It featured two main intentions. First, it would protect Slovenians as a national community through international integration. Second, it strived to achieve the desired stability of the international environment of Central Europe, which had not been possible prior to World War II. Thus, Ehrlich wished to draw attention to the position of Slovenians and Central Europe as a geographical and geopolitical concept. The idea was simple: to transform the Central European territory in such a manner that it could withstand the pressure of German expansionism as well as the looming danger of the communist Soviet Union. The territory between Germany and the Soviet Union would be transformed or united into a confederation. In this regard, Ehrlich believed in the importance of establishing territorial contact between the South and North Slavs, as this was the only way to establish a functioning confederation. The concept partly excluded the existing state organisation. In some variants, it ignored the existence of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The new state would include Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Slovenians, Croats, Serbs, and Hungarians. Optionally, it could also include Bulgarians, Romanians, and Greeks. In his plan, Ehrlich took into account the problem of Austria, as it would need to be included in the confederation in order to ensure territorial contact between the northern and southern Slavic territories. His answer was clear: Austria should indeed exist, albeit weakened and without any hegemonic ambitions, especially not based on German nationalism. Each entity would enjoy a guaranteed statehood status and clearly demarcated jurisdictions within the Confederation. The envisaged state union's centre of gravity would be located in the Slavic part of Central Europe, which would cover the entire area between the Baltic, Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas. Therefore, a territorial connection between the northern and southern Slavic lands was envisioned. Territorial integration would supposedly separate Slovenians from the German territory, thereby ensuring the desired security. As the initiative covered a wide area bordered by the European seas, the name *Intermarium* was adopted. Ehrlich assumed this would be an economically complementary area that would ensure the optimum development of all individual

| 37 Juhant, 2022, pp. 346–355. |

members. He suggested that the seat of such a confederation should be located in Slovenia, because of its central role. However, Ehrlich's hopes that the Western Allies would consider his plan in their discussions on the post-war organisation of Europe were in vain. His proposal – a curiosity among many – remained on paper.³⁸

The plan was based on the Slovenian situation. Therefore, Ehrlich began by outlining the genesis of the 'Slovenian question'. He clearly emphasised Slovenia's central role in the European and Central European context: as a contact point for European transport corridors, flows of goods, and, consequently, economic cooperation. This also explained the purpose of German and Italian expansionism in the Slovenian territory. Ehrlich defined Yugoslavia as the only realistic option at the time of the Habsburg Monarchy's collapse, which had ensured the conditions for the development of the Slovenian identity. However, due to Serbian hegemonic tendencies, that country was unstable in the long term, and the meaningfulness of its continued existence was questionable. Nevertheless, Ehrlich did not rule out the continuation of Yugoslav statehood in advance. He merely proposed to extend it to Bulgaria, thus, in a way, easing the Serbo-Croatian tensions that he believed had prevented the stabilisation of Yugoslavia before World War II. For him, a confederation of the Central European Slavic countries was the optimal solution. If none of the proposed options were acceptable to the international community, Ehrlich also envisioned an independent Slovenian state. Such an independent state would be founded on a democratic basis and would thus have the opportunity to become '*a true Switzerland of Eastern Europe as a cultural, economic, and transport link between Western, Central, and Eastern Europe and the Balkans with internationally guaranteed neutrality and inviolability*'.³⁹

Ehrlich's plan was written from the viewpoint of Slovenians, their historical experience and need to secure their own identity in the broader international environment. The proposal was a kind of a synthesis of the various ideas that circulated in the European space, as well as among the Slovenian intellectual community. It was also in contradiction with the prevailing view that Slovenia's place was in the post-World War II Yugoslav federal state. From its very outset, Ehrlich's plan called for a major reorganisation of the international order in Central Europe and was certainly utopian in this regard. Unsurprisingly, it failed to garner much response and did not resonate strongly at home, either – despite the fact that in 1943, Ciril Žebot prepared a summary of Ehrlich's proposal, and titled it *Narod sredi Evrope* (A Nation in the Middle of Europe).⁴⁰

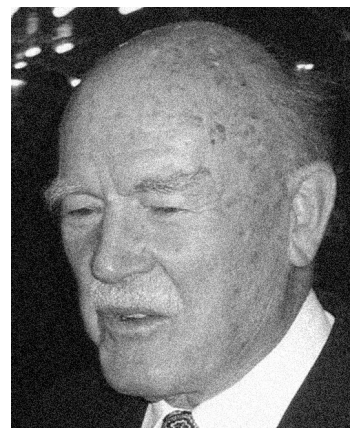
38 Godeša, 2004, p. 48.

39 Godeša, 2002, pp. 279–308.

40 Bober, 1943.

6. France Bučar (1923–2015)⁴¹ and the challenges of the European Union

In 2003, Slovenia's accession to the European Union was already a fact, with only the date to be determined. At that moment, France Bučar was already thinking about developments after the May 2004 accession ceremonies. He was pre-occupied with his deliberations on the European challenges that Slovenian society and politics would need to face after joining the European Union. Bučar was a university professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Ljubljana and a dissident during the communist regime. He was highly critical of economic and political developments in socialist Slovenia. In 1975, he was removed from the university and only



allowed to publish in Catholic media. During the transition period, he became one of the prominent politicians leading Slovenia to independence.⁴² For him Slovenia's future challenges as well those of the European Union were already present at the schematic level in 2003. During the Slovenian accession to the new integration, Bučar wanted to have a good grasp of the new situation that Slovenia would face as a part of the European Union. He felt that such reflection was necessary, especially due to the recent Yugoslav experience. Bučar's memories of the paralysis, and inability to address the crucial social issues in former Yugoslavia, had not faded. Thus, he deliberated on the problems of economic regulation (the functioning of capitalism!), globalisation, and the changing role of the nation-state. According to Bučar, Europe – and with it Slovenia as a future member of the European Union – faced two crucial challenges, and the future and functioning of the European Union depended on their solution. Bučar considered the economic question, which went far beyond the mere organisation of the common market, to be first challenge. The main purpose of the common market was to create suitable conditions to level the playing field between Europe, America, and the Far East. However, that was not enough: a political mechanism also needed to be added to this common market. A European political mechanism was necessary to dictate the observance of the various social criteria (regarding social welfare, nature conservation, social protection, etc.) by the common capitalist market – a criteria that capitalism could

⁴¹ France Bučar, Slovenian politician, photo: Ziga 20:13, 15 January 2007 (UTC), source of the picture: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BucarFrance.JPG#/media/File:BucarFrance.JPG>.

⁴² Ratej, 2018.

not satisfy on its own and which, due to the rapid globalisation, could no longer be regulated by the nation-states.

He further elaborated on the economic issue, claiming that the European Economic Community or the European Union had erected a barrier to the direct influence of global capitalism. However, within its framework, the capitalist logic continued as the logic of a natural system, which would equally discriminate in favour of the more powerful, especially against the weaker national economies, individual companies, and directly against smaller consumers. As the introduction of non-economic correctives – those contributing to social welfare, nature conservation, or protection of national interests – into the functioning of this capitalist mechanism was contrary to the pure economic logic, it reduced the European Union's effectiveness. Therefore, the decision was twofold: whether the European Union should merely be a European economic fortress, or protect its members' other social interests as well. To what extent was it able or willing to sacrifice the immediate economic benefits for other social needs if it protected its members' interests? As long as it only followed the economic logic and its demands, the European Union would in fact only be an economic community because it encompassed only one dimension – that is, the economy.

The national question was directly associated with the economic one, with the two being characterised by an inseparable link – an interdependence. As Bučar wrote, this was why the role of the nation-state needed to be completely reconsidered and redefined. The classic nation-state, as it had emerged in the course of economic development until that time, could no longer fulfil its previous role. Therefore, nation-states needed to be brought together into a community through which the participating nations would be able to achieve the goals that were only possible to accomplish together and which transcended the capacity of any individual nation-state. In this regard, the crucial issue was finding a balance between the interests of the larger and smaller member states. It was a question of coexistence or domination of the large countries within the European Union and therefore a question of democracy and peace. At the same time, the European Union had to establish mechanisms that would not only protect the nations but rather also enable their preservation and development as distinct entities within the European Union. Bučar was convinced that Europe's long-term survival depended on this.⁴³

Naturally, Bučar's thematisation of the European challenges was based on the Slovenian situation and the nation's Yugoslav experience. Simultaneously, he reflected on the Slovenian interests at a broader systemic level as well, taking into account globalisation, the fundamental postulates of the capitalist economy, and mechanisms of the functioning of multiple national communities.

43 Bučar, 2003, pp. 183–193.

Conclusion

In her study on political thought and national programmes, Cirila Toplak stated that it was difficult to theorise on Slovenians having elaborate concepts of Europe prior to the last quarter of the 20th century. She argued, quite convincingly, that most of the ideas defined as ‘European’ had only been given this label ‘post festum’. Thus, it is impossible to present any convincing arguments regarding the concepts of Europe as political projects. As a rule, the concepts were summaries or imitations of other ideas that circulated within the European territory – with the exception of France Bučar, whose deliberations were systemic and global. Toplak concluded that *‘even if Slovenians did not actively contribute to the development of European political concepts, they nevertheless learned about them and recognised themselves in them (or not). Perhaps they did not conceive Europe as an idea, but they certainly lived it’*.⁴⁴

They reflected upon Europe during a period of profound turning points and withing a geostrategic vacuum. This was the time for reflection and contextualisation of Slovenia’s position in the European frameworks. After World War I, during World War II, and at the end of the communist regime, a certain reflection about Europe began to take place, albeit, first and foremost, from the perspective of the Slovenian national question. In the post-World War I era, the division of the Slovenian ethnic territory between four states led to a positive reception of the concepts of Pan-Europa or a Central European Confederation. The Central European concept, as a reorganisation of the status of countries between Germany and the Soviet Union, re-emerged during World War II – of course, with the function of solving the Slovenian national question. Central Europe as a cultural phenomenon became popular at the end of the communist regime, tendering ‘proof’ of European adherence and identity. As Bučar’s text suggests, it was not until the end of the 20th century that clearer concepts of Europe or the European Union took shape. Nevertheless, as early as 1940, Edvard Kocbek had formulated the basic principle of the Slovenian outlook on the European integration processes: to ensure smooth national development through integration into a supranational community as well as internationalise the economy to achieve a greater scale through an open economy. Small national spaces (with protectionist policies) simply could not deliver comparable promises. As such, Kocbek’s perspective was far ahead of that of his contemporaries as well as successors, who paid much more attention to the political and cultural aspects. If not completely ignoring it, they at least neglected the significance of the economic sphere for the harmonious development of the national community. Using different words but conveying the same message, France Bučar, following Edvard Kocbek, argued in favour of urgent European integration in the years before the Slovenian accession to the European Union.

44 Toplak, 2002, pp. 579–587.

Thus, he confirmed the historically established principle that any transfer of a part of the national sovereignty to a broader (state) community was legitimate, if it ensured not only the preservation but also development of the Slovenian national identity.

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