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# Geopolitical Imaginations: Czech and Slovak Variants

## Abstract

Original models for the boundaries of Central Europe, reflecting Czech or Slovak national interests, are seldom encountered. Those that emerged in Czech and Slovak milieus and bear the features of geopolitical imaginations – ones that respect the dynamics of power movement within space and the logic of power balance – are threefold. Firstly, there is the vision of a broader federation, a state composed of multiple nationalities or original states that can balance external pressures from the west and/or the east. The most significant proponent of this model as a means of securing the Czech (Czech–Slavic) national interest is František Palacký. The second model is an empire rooted in Pan-Slavism and capable of resisting western pressure. This concept is most refined in the work of Ľudovít Štúr. The third model, resembling a nation-state, relies on both the potential for fostering collaboration among a bloc of Slavic states and the support of Western powers against Pan-German expansionism. The most prominent author of this model is Tomáš G. Masaryk. Other models, like proletarian internationalism or the European Union, draw from these sources but, in defining national interests, do not proceed from the principle

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of nations' right to self-determination. Practical experience has shown the limited possibilities of all the aforementioned geopolitical imaginations: that they are supplemented, for instance, by historical rights, strategic necessity, or the civic principle and, in some instances, that they fail due to the shifting balance of power in Central Europe. However, replacing them with the civic principle within European integration today entails risks. The only solution is a balanced respect for social, ethnic, and civic rights and the projection of this dynamic balance into international relations.

**Keywords**

federation, geopolitics, nation-state, national interest, power balance, Pan-Slavism, central Europe

Politics is a realm of action. However, for these actions to be successful, they either require sound judgement or luck. Surprisingly, truly thoughtful actions are sparse in politics. Most political actions rely on predictions for a few days ahead, with personal interests often constituting the value base, unfortunately. A politician, even one in high governmental positions, usually makes decisions based on whether a given action will strengthen or at least not weaken their position. What is called "the making of history" tends to be the vector result of opposing or different pressures – in other words, of the various decisions and practical steps of multiple statesmen. If this result aligns with the actor's intention, it is typically because of luck.

However, exceptions do exist: Politicians or intellectuals who base their activities on an analysis of the situation are able to create a model of the future they want to aim for and sometimes they even know how to choose tools that correspond to the possibilities offered by the analysis and that help achieve the desired situation. Behind such models, there is usually what could be called "geopolitical imagination": visions of the future in a space that seeks to respect the balance of power or, more precisely, the relationships between

the power potentials of individual actors. On the practical side, these Czech and Slovak imaginations focus on the Central European space.

The most important Czech and Slovak geopolitical imaginations were formed in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the following century. It was during this time that the three most original models emerged. Everything else that appears as a unique imagination and came later tends to be just a variant of these initial models. The fundamental difference between today and the birth of these models lies in the concept of the actor. The original models considered the nation to be the subject of geopolitical activities, while the contemporary ones consider the state as the main actor. This change is due to a shift in the geopolitical situation in Central Europe. The following can be considered as the starting models:

1. The vision of a federalized Austria, formulated in the second half of the 1840s by Czech historian and political scientist, František Palacký (1798–1876) – One noteworthy variant of this concept was the notion of a Danube federation by Slovak politician Milan Hodža (1878–1944). This vision indirectly helps justify the membership of the Czech Republic or Slovakia in the European Union and NATO.
2. The Pan-Slavic idea, which was originated by the Slovak journalist and politician Ľudovít Štúr (1815–1856) – While at first glance it appears to justify the ties of Prague and Bratislava with Moscow, as a geopolitical imagination, it had only marginal significance in practical politics.
3. The notion of an independent Czech or Czechoslovak nation-state was formulated as a geopolitical imagination by Czech politician, philosopher, and – by today's criteria – political scientist, Tomáš G. Masaryk (1850–1937) – This notion was momentarily realized, albeit not in its purest form.

The vision of a socialist Czechoslovakia built on the foundations of internationalism can be described as a peculiar notion, though it was not explicitly formulated as a geopolitical vision going beyond the general conflict conceived between socialist countries and capitalist imperialism. The idea of Europeanism is a unique concept, which is not rooted in nationality, and while it has Czech and Slovak adherents, it is neither of Czech nor Slovak origin.

## Fundamental Starting Points

The question that all the early geopolitical models asked was straightforward and tied to an essential task: How can the survival and development of a small nation (later a small state) be ensured in a conflict-ridden world? The first two geopolitical models that emerged in Bohemia predated the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. However, even at their inception, there was a growing revolt against Enlightenment rationalism and a rising interest in the scientific foundations of politics and its immutability through human action. Thus, the issue of a small nation's survival took on an existential dimension from the very start.

What was perceived as the "smallness" of a nation was not associated with any inferiority – moral, intellectual, or racial – as was the case in some later geopolitical visions. The primary concern was the nation's small population. It is often suggested that for a nation to survive in the modern world, it needs a population capable of supporting a university with a comprehensive offer of all the fundamental disciplines of the natural, technical, and social sciences taught in the native language. While this is not an exact criterion, it is a useful starting point. A "small state" is typically distinguished from a microstate and a large state or power by (a) a population of fewer than 15 million, (b) a territory less than 150,000 km², and (c) a contribution of less than 1% to the global Gross Domestic Product. By these criteria, which are merely indicative, both the current Czechia and Slovakia are considered small states.

Both the Czech and Slovak nations felt an existential threat from larger neighboring nations with different national characteristics. Specifically, for the Czechs, it was from Germany, and for the Slovaks, Hungary. This distinct threat dynamic had its implications, in some instances complicating or even precluding Czech-Slovak collaboration. It is common knowledge that, at the dawn of the era later known as the Spring of Nations, even the seemingly legitimate demands of emerging small and large nations could precipitate sharp conflict.

While Palacký was creating his geopolitical vision of Central Europe, Germany was grappling with national revival. Following the Napoleonic wars, the emerging German Confederation comprised

38 "sovereign princedoms and free cities of Germany." However, it lacked fundamental state characteristics. Two models of unification emerged: the Greater Germany model, which included the Austrian Empire, and the Lesser Germany model, which excluded Austria. The rationale against including Austria was twofold: Austria was too vast, it was a competitor with different ambitions, and while most of the "princedoms and cities" were predominantly Protestant (except the Kingdom of Bavaria), Catholicism dominated in the Austrian Empire. The issue of confession might seem insignificant today, but during the romantic times of the Spring of Nations, the horrors of the Thirty Years' War were not forgotten. Ultimately, the Lesser Germany model, centered around the Kingdom of Prussia, prevailed, culminating in the formation of the German Empire – or in the Franco-Prussian War – in 1871.

Accompanying the mission to unify Germany was the effort to conceptualize it, which gave birth to modern German patriotism. Lesser Germany eventually created the conditions for the emergence of a distinctive Austrian patriotism. The fate of Greater Germany was more tumultuous. Even today, it is challenging to pinpoint the nuanced differences between terms like "German," "Germanic," "Teutonic," "Nordic," and "Aryan." The term "Pan-Germanic" was even more contentious, especially when intertwined with social Darwinism and racism. It could be associated with both legitimate German patriotism and Hitler's Nazism. Many proponents of German geopolitics succumbed to social Darwinian ideas about "blood and soil," racial conflict, and German or Germanic superiority. However, this shift toward Nazism was never inevitable; it was only one branch, albeit a crucial one, of Germany's emerging self-identity.

Amid this partial encirclement, Czech patriotism and distinct Czech geopolitical visions were born. In regions of the Bohemian Crown where German minority enclaves existed, the radicalism of certain German groups grew alongside Czech national consciousness. Interestingly, radical proponents of Germanism among Czech revivalists in the 19th and early 20th centuries did not necessarily mirror the entire spectrum of the contemporary Pan-German movement in their fervent criticism; yet they were right in their beliefs. History revealed that initially marginal chauvinistic

currents gradually gained power, and the worst predictions about German–Slav conflicts, though not universally accepted at the time, materialized during World War II.

On the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that the German Enlightenment philosopher and Protestant preacher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) provided the philosophical basis for both Czech and Slovak patriotism. Herder restored self-confidence to the oppressed Slavic nations using the modern Enlightenment idea of justice. He was the first to label the Slavs as the "Greeks of the new age." Especially in his essay on the Slavs (1791), he expressed idealized views of the Slavs, claiming they were "never a nation of war and adventurous ventures like the Germans." The Slavs were reportedly:

> of gentle manners, hospitable and obedient, averse to plunder and pillage. All this could not stand against oppression; in fact, it contributed to it. For not striving for world dominance, not having bellicose hereditary princes and rather being submissive if only they could live in peace in their lands, they enabled numerous nations, especially Germanic tribes, to gravely sin against them.

Herder wrote that "what the Franks began, the Saxons finished; in all lands, the Slavs were exterminated or enslaved, their lands then divided amongst bishops and magnates." According to Herder, the Slavs' misfortune was that, on the one hand, they were close to the Germans, while on the other hand, they were exposed to all the invasions from the east, suffering greatly under the Mongol rule. Yet he also contended that the Slavic nations inhabit an area of Europe which could be the most beautiful once "fully educated and commercially exploited." As the course of evolution demands that throughout Europe, bellicosity be suppressed and diligence and mutual relations be rewarded, "you too, once full and fortunate nations, will finally awaken from your long, idle slumber, finally freed from your servile chains, and enjoy your beautiful landscapes from Asia to the Carpathians, from the Don to the Mulde as your own, where you will be able to celebrate your ancient festivities of peaceful trade and diligence" (Herder, 1941, pp. 330–336).

To understand the Czech and Slovak national revival, it is essential to note that Herder's concept of the Slavs' civilizing mission was organically linked with humanitarian ideals and the notion of the inalienable rights of all nations. Herder's work contributed to shaping the idea of a nation as a natural ethnic formation and a state as an artificial institution. He also envisioned the concept of self-determination as a nation's right to its own state and, not least, developed a vision of equality among nations. This legacy of Herder is evident in all Czech and Slovak geopolitical imaginings that steered clear of social Darwinism.

The position of Slovaks in the Kingdom of Hungary differed from that of Czechs in Austria. Czech patriotism was born with the memory of an independent Czech state. However, as the Hungarians arrived in the Pannonian Plain, the Slovaks lost their statehood and became, as Vladimír Mináč put it, "a nation without history" (1972, p. 4). Pushed north of the Danube by the Hungarians and later by the Ottomans, they survived without a distinct culture, nobility, or intelligentsia, essentially preserving their Slavic language. The revival thus required the codification of Slovak language and the development of a unique culture. Not least, it also involved the demarcation of territory that could be called Slovak and later Slovakia; the internal administrative divisions of the Kingdom of Hungary consistently disregarded ethnic boundaries. Hungarian nationalism dominated not only among Hungarian conservatives, but also among Hungarian liberals defining itself against the Slavs to the north and to the south as well as against the Romanians. The transition from Latin to Hungarian as the official language in Hungary came later than the transition to German in the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – and perhaps for that reason was associated with greater radicalism.

## Federalized Austria

František Palacký is often perceived as an exceptionally skilled historian, journalist, and politician during the national revival period. This has earned him the title "father of the nation" from some commentators. However, he was also a political theorist who was skilled at

evaluating electoral choices, drafting constitutions, and producing analyses and forecasts of international politics. Palacký's works include the rudiments of classical geopolitics, such as centralization or the Heartland theory, as well as notions about the inherent power balance in the international political system. Although some of his thoughts on international politics are scattered across minor essays, collectively they represent a conceptual exploration to define and champion the Czech national interest in Central Europe from the 1840s to 1860s.

Characteristics of the model: *The Czech, or potentially Czech–Slavic, nation is too small to defend its interests through its own nation-state. Hence, it needs to align with other small Central European nations to create a sufficiently large entity capable of resisting pressures from both the west and the east. The existence of Austria was thus a blessing. However, Austria should be structured as a federation, in which each nation can ensure its cultural uniqueness.*

František Palacký posited an inexorable trend toward global centralization, where large states or empires increasingly dominate the geopolitical landscape. This perspective presaged Nicholas Spykman's 1942 thesis that small states serve as vacuums or buffer zones, their existence contingent on the strategic interests of more powerful nations.

In the pivotal year of 1848, Palacký delineated the Czech national interest within the complex power dynamics of Central Europe. Rejecting an invitation to the Frankfurt Assembly – a forum discussing German unification – he underscored the distinct non-German identity of the lands of the Czech Crown. Palacký's stance was not anti-German per se; rather, he opposed the concept of a Greater German empire, while leaving room for the visions of Lesser Germans.

In his seminal work, "The History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia," Palacký elaborated on the unique role of the Czech nation as a cultural and geopolitical bridge between Germany and the Slavic world, as well as between East and West in Europe.

Furthermore, Palacký expressed grave concerns about Russia's burgeoning influence. He stressed that the impending threat was

not inherent in its Russian character, but due to Russia's potential emergence as a universal monarchy, which he deemed catastrophic.

Underpinning Palacký's geopolitical vision was the idea of pressure from both the West and the East, threatening the smaller nations of Central Europe. In his "Letter to Frankfurt," Palacký (1977) rejected an alliance with the West for national reasons and with the East for "ideological" reasons. The danger he saw in the "Letter to Frankfurt," concerning the "universalism" of the Russian Empire, can be characterized as a fear of the totality of the internal regime, which he referred to in the Afterword (instead of a preface) to *Radhost* (1872) as an "amalgam of Mongolian and German governmental principles" (Palacký, 1977, pp. 293, 52). For Palacký, the Eastern pressure was a significant problem throughout European history, from the migration of nations to the Turkish expeditions. As did the later British geographer and geopolitician, Halford Mackinder, Palacký saw the historical pressure of nomads on Europe as significant in shaping the history of Central Europe, but he also added the role of the Ottoman Empire.

Palacký rejected both the Greater German vision of Germany and the ideas of Slavic unification around Russia. In 1848, for Palacký, both the German *Drang nach Osten* and the Russian *Стремление на Запад* [Push to the West] were equally opponents of Austria and the Czechs. Therefore, Palacký believed that the creation of the Austrian Empire "through voluntary agreements" three centuries earlier represented a "significant blessing from divine providence for all of them." Had each nation retained full sovereignty, "how many and how bloody disputes would have arisen between them! Perhaps even one of them would have perished completely by now." The pathos of the "Letter to Frankfurt" is illustrated in the famous statement: "If the Austrian state had not existed for a long time, we would have to ensure, for the sake of Europe, indeed for humanity itself, that it would be created as soon as possible" (Palacký, 1977, pp. 350, 161). This concept of Austria as a state protecting small Slavic nations – Austro-Slavism – generally gave a state idea to the German Austrians in Vienna, justifying the existence of the Habsburg monarchy even after the Ottoman pressure on Central Europe had disappeared.

However, Palacký's vision of a federalized Austria, where the national principle would be combined with historical rights, was not fulfilled. German nationalism grew; some Czechs and Slovaks turned to Pan-Slavism; Poles, Serbs, and Romanians saw their future in a nation-state outside of Austria, and Hungarians achieved Austro-Hungarian dualism. In the 1870s, Palacký described his emphasis on the need for Austria as a significant political mistake. In the series of eight articles known as the "Idea of the Austrian State" (1865), another of Palacký's famous statements was voiced: "We existed before Austria, we will exist after it!" (Palacký, 1977, p. 387). By then, however, the position and vision of Austria as a balancing force between the East and the West were shifting to a realm, within witch the division between the West and East was occurring.

Yet, not only was the balance of power inside Austria changing, but so was the balance of power in Europe – leading to a change in Palacký's view of Russia and its role in promoting the Czech national interest. This change is particularly evident in the aforementioned Afterword to *Radhost*. There, Palacký concluded that there is no need to fear a "universal Russian monarchy" (1977, pp. 50–58). He believed that make the Czechs "in the inevitable global battle between Germanic and Slavic peoples, unable to stand on the side of their natural relatives and defenders." However, he maintained his humanistic distance – continuing to criticize the Russian government and diplomacy. He saw the basis for an alliance with Russia in the proximity of the nations, even recognizing a complete "identity of the Russian and Czech spirit concerning faith and religion, at least from a subjective point of view" (Palacký, 1977, pp. 50–58). He added that if Austria were justly federalized, it would have a friendly relationship with Russia.

### Note on Federation

Geopolitical definitions of Central Europe primarily fall into two categories: those that include Germany and those that exclude it. Notable thinkers who have explored these conceptions include Czech František Palacký, Pole Adam Czartoryski (1770–1861), Romanian Aurel Popovici (1863–1917), Austrian Karl Renner (1871–1950), and

Hungarian Oszkár Jászi (1875–1957). In addition, some discussions touch upon Illyrian ideas on the restoration of the Croatian kingdom within Hungary, as well as the unification of all South Slavic peoples. The 1843 plan by Hungarian Miklós Wesselényi and the concept proposed by Croat Ognjeslav Utješinović Ostrožinski (1817–1890) are also noteworthy. In the contexts of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Bohumil Šmeral (1880–1941) and Milan Hodža (1878–1944) deserve mention. Some of these thinkers have emphasized the importance of organizing historic or legal entities and medieval state formations, while others have defined entities based on ethnic boundaries. Some have even combined both approaches.

Ideas similar to Palacký's conception of a Central European federation were also adopted by some advocates of German views of a Central Europe that included Germany. The origins can be found in German economists like Friedrich (George) List (1789–1846), but these visions shifted toward political concepts in other authors. They were further developed by conservative thinkers such as Theodor Schiemann (1847–1921) or liberals such as the German Reichstag member and Lutheran priest Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919) in his once-celebrated book *Mitteleuropa* (Central Europe) from 1915, and Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922), a Swedish theorist and politician considered one of the founders of the German strand of geopolitics. However, for these authors, Mitteleuropa, Zentraleuropa, or Zwischeneuropa were primarily solutions to Germany's geopolitical problems.

There were also visions of unifying Central Europe around Germany that presumed protection for smaller, non-German nations. For instance, according to Ola Tunander (2001), Kjellén believed that the future of Central Europe united around Germany required Germany, with the Slavs' approval, to "adopt a multiethnic, Austro-Habsburg face" (p. 460). However, this was not the dominant or the sole current in the German quest for identity. An opposing viewpoint emphasizing "racial purity" can be found in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (2000, p. 285):

> From today's perspective, it must be regarded as fortunate that Germanization, in the sense of Joseph II's efforts, did not succeed in Austria. Its success would indeed have preserved the Austrian state, but

> linguistic unity would have led to the decline of the German nation's racial level.... A state nation might have been born, but a cultural nation would have been lost.

From the perspective of Czech and Slovak geopolitical imagination, the strongest reflection of Palacký's concept can be seen in the work of Milan Hodža, a Slovak and Czechoslovak politician from the First Republic era. Hodža (1997), in exile after the Munich Agreement, published the book *Federation in Central Europe* in 1942, where the very first sentence hints at a modified inheritance from Palacký: "War events in Central Europe affirm the idea of a future, firmly organized collaboration of eight states, located in close geographical proximity between Russia, Germany, and Italy" (pp. 65, 231). According to his model, the Danube Federation should consist of eight states covering an area reminiscent of the Three Seas Initiative: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece.

Hodža's attempt to revive Palacký's perception of Central Europe as a region under constant pressure from both the West and the East did not involve the idea of centralization – though he too suggested that "it's a physical sociological law that a larger society group must push the smaller one and eventually absorb it" (Čurda, 1994, p. 151). The foundation of Hodža's concept (1997) can be traced back to his 1931 lecture called "Czechoslovakia and Central Europe", where he argued that "European geopolitics identifies two significant corridors from north to south" with a "civilizational-organizational significance" (pp. 44, 50); the Central European corridor starts at the Vistula, moving through passes to the Morava or Váh rivers, then to the Czech-Slovak, Hungarian, and Yugoslav Danube, at Belgrade along the Serbian Morava River, to Vardar and Thessaloniki. Central Europe, with its unique mentality organized around this corridor, should be strong enough to counteract both western and eastern pressures, but should also act as a link or bridge between the East and the West and should have an agrarian character that would enable it to trade with the West (Hodža, 1997, pp. 44, 50).

The Danubian Federation was envisioned to emerge after World War II, serving as a tool for a new power equilibrium.

> Small or medium-sized European nations, when standing alone, will never succeed in establishing a serious guarantee of just balance. As independent entities, they cannot be partners to Germany without the risk of being consumed by it one day. Relations of balance and partnership require a Central Europe that is not a mosaic of several weak states but a federation of all… Their federation, not isolated from Western Europe, could offer a significant contribution to European security merely by its existence. By uniting political forces equivalent to the power of neighboring aggressive nationalism, it would create a counterbalance (Hodža, 1997, p. 221).

Thus, a strong Central Europe should become an indispensable continental core of European security for Western Europe, and especially its historical powers.

Milan Hodža (1997) believed that European security should be based on democracy, but not exclusively the Western kind: he believed it also needed the support of a united Central Europe. He argued that the "affinity, if not identity, of democratic ideals and institutions of Western and Central European democracies offers promising prospects" (p. 295). An integrated Central Europe represented a step toward a united Europe for Hodža. Moreover, he meticulously developed a draft constitution for the Danubian Federation, detailing the roles of various federal institutions. Interestingly for citizens of the European Union, the federal constitution proposed by the Federal Congress, whose members were to be elected by a two-thirds majority of national parliaments at a ratio of one member per million inhabitants, was to be approved and published by the parliaments of the federation states. Exiting the federation would not be voluntary and would require a constitutional change. Citizens of member states would simultaneously have federal citizenship, valid in all federation states.

Hodža, a former Czechoslovak prime minister, was among the politicians who, after the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands and Poland, supported the utmost rapprochement between Czechoslovakia and Poland. From 1939, the governments-in-exile of Czechoslovakia and Poland held consultations regarding the post-war creation of a Czech-Polish confederation. The Czechoslovak-Polish declaration

on the confederation (1942) states in its first article that "both governments wish the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation to also include other states of the European region associated with the vital interests of Czechoslovakia and Poland" (Veselý, 2004, p. 461). At the same time, a similar agreement was signed between Serbian and Greek exiled politicians. However, before the end of the war, the powers had different plans for Central Europe.

### Pan-Slavism

In the Czech and Slovak contexts, Ľudovít Štúr (1993) significantly shaped the Slavic idea through his comprehensive geopolitical work, *Slovanstvo a svět budoucnosti* [Slavdom and the World of the Future]. Completed in the early 1850s and first published in 1867, the book had a peculiar fate, as it had little direct cultural or political influence in its homeland. Initially written and published in German, the book was quickly translated into Russian and published twice in that language (in 1867 and 1909). However, its first Slovak edition did not appear until 1993.

The varying levels of interest in the book can be attributed to its theoretical/methodological foundation, which blends elements of Enlightenment thought, Hegelianism, and conservative romanticism. The work includes classic reflections on Western nations deemed to have 'burned out', as well as those whose spiritual contributions guide humanity. These reflections are linked to a Philo-Slavic and Herderian perspective, which posits that Russians and Slavs have an emerging historical mission. This mission is understood in spiritual, even religious terms, adding a transcendental dimension to Pan-Slavism.

Ľudovít Štúr explicitly rejected both constitutional liberalism and communism. He wrote, "from a political point of view, the West is transitioning from absolutist monarchies to constitutional states, which ultimately transform into social and communist republics, leading to the decay of humanity by destroying humaneness" (Štúr, 1993, pp. 113–114). In Štúr's vision, the Slavs are the chosen people tasked with realizing the idea of Christian goodness throughout history.

Characteristics of the model: *In the face of intense Germanic pressure on Central Europe, Štúr posited that no Slavic nation could resist alone. He argued that the sole solution was to integrate all Slavic nations into the Russian Empire, thereby adopting Russian cultural traditions.*

During the 1848 revolution, Štúr initially defended Austria, viewing it as the functional core of the Holy Alliance. However, his perspective shifted when he recognized Austria's true nature. He wrote his pivotal book during a time when no Slavic nation, except Russia, had its own independent state. In this work, he explored three potential paths for Slavic tribes: a Slavic federation, Austro-Slavism, and a Russo-Slavic empire.

Štúr claimed that a Slavic federation could address the Slavs' situation via a republican system. However, this would mean excluding Russia, where republicanism was unlikely to flourish. A federation could potentially include Bohemia, Moravia, Lusatia, Silesia, Poznań, Slovakia, and others, but he highlighted internal divisions and 'foreign guests' as obstacles.

According to Štúr, the idea of a Slavic federation faced three insurmountable issues: diverse dialects and literatures among Slavic tribes, complex geographical distribution, and differing religious beliefs. He also believed that external factors like German, Hungarian, and Italian opposition, as well as Russia's stance against any non-Russian Slavic state, would prevent the formation of a federation.

Štúr dismissed Austro-Slavism as an even worse option. Austria had consistently acted to Germanize the Slavs and had always been aligned with German interests. He declared, "only upon the demise of Austria and Turkey will a better, eagerly anticipated future for the Slavs flourish." (Štúr, 1993)

Turning to the idea of a Russo-Slavic empire, Štúr argued that Russia, being the only free and strong Slavic state, had both the mission and the right to unify all Slavic nations. He believed that Russia offered an alternative better than Western constitutionalism. He outlined two radical measures for this vision: a general conversion to the Orthodox faith and the adoption of Russian as a universal literary language. Intriguingly, these propositions represented a departure from Štúr's own beliefs, as he had been a Lutheran and had helped develop literary Slovak.

Štúr's critique of Western cultural decline and his promotion of Pan-Slavic messianism were not rooted in nihilism or confrontational stances. Rather, they carried a humanistic tone. He felt that the Slavs could learn valuable lessons from the West, particularly in governance, science, and the arts. Specifically, he urged the Slavs to adopt strict state interests while maintaining individual personalities, to engage with Western science, and to be introduced to the 'temple of art' in order to realize worldly ideals. These ideas resonate with Herder's legacy, but also with the idea of linguist and historian Jan Kollár (1793–1852) (2007), a poet who, in the epigram *Advice from Mother Slava*, wrote:

"What are you? A Czech; what are you? A Russian; what are you? A Serb;
and you? I am a Pole; take the sheets, brothers, erase that, write: A Slav."
„Co jsi ty? Čech; co ty? Rus; co ty? Srb; a ty? já Polák jestem;
vezměte lejstra, bratří, smažte to, pište: Slovan."

He complemented this with the poem-aphorism *Horlic*:

"Consider the nation just as the vessel of humanity,
and always, when you shout: Slavian! let man echo back to you!"
„Národ tak považuj jediné jako nádobu lidství,
a vždy, voláš-li: Slavian! nechť se ti ozve člověk!"[1]

Although generally humanistic in his views, Štúr had moments where he sharply diverged from them, particularly when influenced by medieval antisemitism of a religious and social nature, rather than a racial nature (Štúr, 1993, p. 119). His views were also tinged with skepticism toward certain Slavic nations. For instance, Štúr criticized the Poles for their hostility toward Russia. He believed that the Poles were responsible for their own partition and saw their continuous struggles with the Russians as a fight for dominance over the Slavic world. In his opinion, the outcome of this battle was favorable for the Slavs at large.

1 Kollár, J. (2007). Menší básně [Shorter poems]. Retrieved July 23, 2023 from http://zlatyfond.sme.sk/dielo/145/Kollar_Mensi-basne

Štúr reserved his harshest comments for the Czechs and the proponents of Austro-Slavism. He accused them of prioritizing tribal interests at the expense of broader Slavic unity. According to Štúr, the Czechs were increasingly influenced by Western ideologies, which not only distanced them from other Slavs, but also stunted the growth of Slavdom. He traced the origins of Austro-Slavism to Czech intellectual František Palacký, who was heavily influenced by a Czech aristocracy that was itself reliant on Austria.

Interestingly, Štúr's critiques coincided with a shift in Czech nationalism. Czech leaders began emphasizing historical rights as the basis for national interests, drifting away from the concept of nations having inherent rights to their own states. This changing focus often led to the neglect of other Slavic peoples, especially the Slovaks, a point that Štúr found troubling.

### Note on Pan-Slavism

Some critics describe Pan-Slavism as a "Czech product made from German material" (Černý, 1995, p. 6). In the Czech territories, however, both Pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy only resonated at the level of literary arts and ideological slogans or emotions. They found no author who could formulate a corresponding geopolitical model. However, Russian Nikolai Y. Danilevsky references both Štúr and Kollár in his work *Russia and Europe* (1871), which is the most pronounced expression of Pan-Slavic geopolitics.

Initial notions of Slavic mutual relations did not only stem from Czech or Slovak circles. Their originators were authors like the Czech clergyman, historian, and writer Tomáš Pešina from Čechorod (1629–1680), Croatian poet Pavao Ritter Vitezović (1675–1737), and Slovenian writer Anton Tomaž Linhart (1756–1795). In 1665, about two centuries before the publication of Štúr's book *Slavdom and the World of the Future*, Croatian Catholic priest Juraj Križanić (ca. 1618–1683) traveled from Rome to Moscow. There, he published a Slavic grammar and attempted to create a new Pan-Slavic language. He harbored strong animosity toward the Germans, accusing them of driving the Slavs from entire regions – Moravia, Pomerania, Silesia, and Prussia – and warned that Germans primarily despised

the Russians since they had never conquered their empire. According to Križanić, it was the Germans who subjected the Russians to utter contempt in Europe. Križanić sought fraternal harmony between the Russians and Poles. With his visions, he turned to the tsar, whom he saw as the liberator of the Danubian Slavs – and was subsequently exiled to Siberia.

### National State

According to Article 1, paragraph 1 of Law No. 22/1930 of the Czechoslovak Republic, "T. G. Masaryk has merited the state." The subsequent paragraph of this law decreed that this sentence would be engraved in stone in both chambers of the National Assembly. Masaryk's achievements are primarily associated with his extraordinary diplomatic activity in exile during World War I, leading to the major powers' recognition of the need to form Czechoslovakia. However, this was not Masaryk's only contribution: the first Czechoslovak president also justified the possibility and need for the creation of a national state for the Czechs and Slovaks, a geopolitical vision starkly different from the legacies of Palacký or Štúr. Masaryk defended the idea of a nation-state using arguments from the theory of balance of power, the right of nations to self-determination (i.e., natural rights), historical rights, and economic and military/strategic security considerations and contrasting the conflict between theocracy and democracy.

Characteristics of the model: *Pan-Germanic expansionism and Germany's defeat in World War I created a new situation in Europe where even non-German powers were interested in the formation of small nation-states in Central Europe. Active diplomacy combined with Slavic solidarity allowed the small Czechoslovakia to withstand power balance fluctuations.*

Before World War I, in his books *Česká otázka* [The Czech Question] (1895) and *Naše nynější krize* [Our Current Crisis] (1895), Masaryk (1990) defended Palacký's vision of Czech national interests within Austria. In *Naše nynější krize*, he directly stated: "I do not expect any tremendous world catastrophes and very realistically count on the existence of Austria" (p. 233). However, when the world catastrophe did occur, he did not hesitate to reassess his position on the nation-state based on a new analysis of the situation. His new

vision is found in speeches, memoranda, and studies, especially in the confidential memorandum to the British Foreign Minister "Independent Bohemia" (1915) and in the book *Nová Evropa. Stanovisko slovanské* [The New Europe: The Slavic Stance] (1918).

Masaryk's geopolitical vision of the nation-state was rooted in the idea of the natural right of nations to self-determination, but he also enriched his views with arguments from historical rights. He found the ideas of natural rights reflected in the speeches of US President Woodrow Wilson in particular. However, in *Nová Evropa*, he did not hesitate to reject Wilson's concept of autonomy for nations within Austro-Hungary, as laid out in his famous Fourteen Points. According to Masaryk (1920),

> the Czechs have a historical right to the independence of the Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia), and they have the right to independence for the state they have created. Furthermore, they have the natural and historical right to annex Slovakia, brutally suppressed by the Hungarians. Slovakia, forming the nucleus of the Great Moravian Empire, was torn away by the Hungarians in the 10th century... Therefore, the connection between Czechs and Slovaks is a legitimate demand (pp. 160, 166–167).

The self-determination principle also served Masaryk in *Nová Evropa* as a justification for the "new plan," which "was proposed by the Ruthenians living in Hungary ... However, this proposal must be approved by the people in Hungary" (Masaryk, 1920, pp. 160,166–167).

Though Masaryk used categories from Anglo-Saxon geopolitics in the aforementioned memorandum, his focus was on the Central European situation. Radical Pan-Germanism served as the basis for his analysis of Central European balance: "By colonizing Austria, Germany is trying to colonize the Balkans, aiming for Constantinople and Baghdad" (Československá zahraniční politika 1914–1945, 2000, p. 13). Preventing this expansionism is not just in the interests of the Czechs or Slovaks, or generally in the interest of the 18 small nations living between Germans and Russians, from the Finns to the Greeks, for whom Pan-Germanism denied a future. It is also in the interest of non-German powers in Europe. Palacký's idea of

federalizing Austria was not realized; Masaryk saw an increasing role of the Great Germans in Austria and Germany itself. Austria's original role as a defense against the Turks cannot be fulfilled against Germany, and Austria thus has no positive idea; it has become a medieval relic, serving as a German vanguard in the Balkans.

The Great War should result in the reconstruction of Central Europe. When writing *Nová Evropa*, Masaryk (1920) was convinced that the concurrence and identity of Czechoslovak and Polish interests are given by the Pan-German Prusso-Austrian alliance. He regarded the Serbs as the closest allies of the Czechs (Czechoslovaks), with whom a corridor should connect the new Czechoslovak state. The corridor should then be followed by a Yugoslav state, creating a democratic connection between Czechoslovakia and France through a broad democratic belt.

According to Masaryk, the alliance of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia was to be guaranteed by Russia. "Even during the Bolshevik Revolution, Masaryk still counted on the protection of the great Slavic Empire and was terrified of what it would mean if Czechoslovakia could not lean on powerful Russia," wrote Masaryk's long-time associate Karel Stloukal (1930, pp. 41–42, 137), recalling Masaryk's St. Petersburg speech of September 1917:

> What will a weak Russia mean for us if we are granted independence and do not have enough support? And what is true for us is true for the Poles and the South Slavs.... We must wish and each of us must work to make Russia strong, then Germany and Austria will be weaker (Stloukal, 1930, pp. 41–42, 137).

Stloukal himself then added a remarkable thought that suggests the forced expediency of Masaryk's turn from realism to idealism: "After the subversion of Russia by the Bolsheviks, however, Masaryk's ideas about relations with Russia took a different direction. He no longer relies on Russian help, looking for a substitute in the great ideas of democracy" (Stloukal, 1930, pp. 41–42, 137).

According to the book *Nová Evropa*, the Central Powers were "unnational and directly anti-national" (Masaryk, 1920, pp. 74, 110, 176–178). Therefore, he also assumed – or tried to assert? – that the

primary task of the war was to politically reconstruct Eastern Europe on a national basis. Masaryk (1920, pp. 74, 110, 176–178) argued that "if the Czechoslovak nation remained in the thrall of the Germans and the German-allied Asiatics (Hungarians and Turks) or even fell" , the Pan-German plans would be realized. Therefore, according to him, "the Czechoslovak question is a world question and is the question of this war" (pp. 74, 110, 176–178). He did not consider the liberation of Bohemia to be the most important objective of the war, but was convinced that "the aims which the Allies have set themselves cannot be achieved without the liberation of Bohemia" (pp. 74, 110, 176–178).

## Risks of Modeling

Forecasting in politics recalls the dilemmas posed by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: a precise depiction of the current state inhibits capturing its dynamics, while illustrating the dynamics blurs the image of the present. Essentially, geopolitical models contradict what they purport to represent: geopolitics is the study of the movement of power in space – or to put it in the language of the school of political realism, the study of shifting power balances. A model captures only the significant components of the current system, its elements, and their interrelations. Yet, international politics is an "unstable substance" (George Kennan), potentially making today's accurate model tomorrow's mistake.

The three geopolitical imaginations mentioned above all reflect the ambiance of the "Spring of Nations," embodying national revival tasks of emancipation under the changing circumstances of the late 19th century and the dawn of the 20th. They primarily build upon the idea of the natural rights of nations to self-determination, with such self-determination being seen as the right to have one's own state, since only an independent state can guarantee a nation's full existence. This is true for Palacký's vision of Austria, where federalization meant securing the cultural distinctiveness of nations. This idea is not inherently flawed: both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights – documents adopted by

the UN General Assembly in 1966 – declare in their opening statements that nations "freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development." The challenge often lies in the practical implementation of these proclaimed rights.

In politically concretizing his ideas on nations' right to self-determination, Palacký had to make concessions to other theoretical/methodological principles. In his above-quoted Afterword (instead of a preface) to *Radhošť*, Palacký (1977) wrote that he understood nations "in the genetic sense of the word," as unique entities (p. 40). However, in his debates, he also employed arguments based not on the "genetic" ethno-linguistic characterization of a nation, but on a political/territorial understanding, where Czechs were seen as the inhabitants of Bohemia, meaning both Slavic and German ethnicities. His proposed concept of the Austrian constitution of 1849 included four lands, a number he later increased. In the constitutional committee of the Imperial Diet in January 1849 in Kroměříž, after his initial constitution draft was rejected, Palacký presented a revised version that introduced eight groupings of lands assembled "so that the nations would be content in Austria." In this draft, Czech lands encompassed the "Czech parts of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia and Hungarian Slovakia." He did not reject the idea of separating areas with a German majority from the historical lands of the Bohemian Crown outright. He added that he was not "against the division of German and Czech parts of Bohemia (Deutsch-Böhmens and Czechiens); if only it were practically possible, I would suggest it. Bohemia is a basin, but a basin cannot be split without being destroyed" (Dějiny, 2005, p. 139). When Palacký said this, a voice from the hall responded: "But it can be patched." A leaky basin might be patched, but the borders of a state? When the Czech lands lost their border regions following the Munich Agreement in 1938, they became defenseless and the remainder was occupied without resistance by Nazi Germany the following year. From a theoretical/methodological perspective, something else about Palacký's argumentation stands out: In defining the borders of the Czechoslovak land, he used strategic reasoning rather than arguments grounded in natural rights.

Development of the National Revival thought in the Czech lands during the 1860s shifted the defense of the national interest, at least in part, from natural law ideas toward the doctrine of historical law. At first glance, this doctrine drew from Palacký's conception of Czech history. However, its primary focus was not on the Hussite Revolution, but rather on proving that the constitutional uniqueness of the Czech state remained intact even when the Czech lands became part of the Habsburg monarchy. The essence of this historical legal doctrine claimed that the relationship between the Czech state and the wider empire was a contract between representatives of this state and the Austrian monarch. According to this contract, in the event of the dynasty's extinction, the Estates retained the right to freely elect a new king. Neither the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 nor the Pragmatic Sanction of Emperor Charles VI in 1713 fundamentally changed this relationship between the dynasty and the Czech Crown. The Provincial Estates Assemblies remained the bearers of state sovereignty. Issues began due to the straightforward centralism of Maria Theresa, who, through her reforms, interrupted the organic development of Czech constitutional law. Nevertheless, this doctrine never deviated from the idea that the lands of the Bohemian Crown were part of Habsburg Austria. However, it did mark a departure from justifying national distinctiveness based on natural law and it separated a portion of the Czech representation from Slovak interests, who could not invoke historical law.

The Central European Federation model developed by Milan Hodža arises from problematic geopolitical characteristics. Primarily, the corridor idea lacks a real foundation: The region was never centrifugally integrated. A geopolitical space with its core equipped with gravitational force typically has specific external borders or border zones. The 20th century demonstrated that the Danube, as the axis of a geopolitical region highlighted by Palacký in "Writing to Frankfurt" [*Psaní do Frankfurtu*] did not foster Central European solidarity; during the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, neutral Austria was more amicable toward Belgrade than the political elites of Central European Slavic countries. The notion of an agrarian Central European Federation trading with the industrial West does not conform to the laws of capitalism. It seems that Hodža's project

reflects a nostalgia, recalling certain development possibilities of Austria-Hungary – and its collaboration with the Habsburg heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand d'Este, when he tried to exert his influence in favor of Slovak interests and the federalization of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

Different challenges are present when defending Slovak or Czech national interests in the Pan-Slavism concept of Ľudovít Štúr. Primarily, Štúr oversimplified his geopolitical imagination by nearly consistently labeling Slavic nations as tribes of a single Slavic nation. This political inaccuracy is significant: No supranational "pan-" idea – Pan-Slavic, Pan-Germanic, Pan-Arabic, etc. – ever gained a practical strength comparable to the mobilizing power of national ideas. In Tsarist Russia, Pan-Slavism never became the official state doctrine; after all, the Holstein-Gottorp-Romanov dynasty ruled by divine right, not because it was Slavic. Even Nazi Pan-Germanism was politically rooted in chauvinism that elevated Germans, not Germanics, above other nations, not to mention the unsuccessful attempts at Pan-Arab unification between Egypt and Syria or Libya. In the Czech lands, even before the revolution of 1848, there was a significant influence of the Slavism concept formulated by the poet and influential publicist Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821–1856). In his essay "Slav and Czech" [*Slovan a Čech*] from 1846, he wrote that

> our homeland is not Slavdom, but only Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Silesia… In short, with national pride, I say "I am Czech," but never "I am a Slav." Whenever I call myself a Slav, I always do it in an academic, geographical, and ethnographic sense (Borovský, 1981, pp. 72, 88).

Štúr (1993) himself was aware of the unrealistic emergence of a Russo-Slavic empire in his time. "We cannot expect our tribes to overcome their humanly understandable self-love and voluntarily commit to this significant step toward unification, and under foreign domination, there is no need to push for it at any cost," he wrote. "This significant step will be decided in favor of the Slavs only under the pressure of significant political events" (p. 173). The three decades after the demise of the "socialist community" and the implosion of

the Soviet Union show that it is easier to instigate conflict between Slavic countries than to find mutual understanding.

Tomáš G. Masaryk, in his conception of a nation-state, grappled with many of the same issues earlier tackled by František Palacký. He perceived the quest for balance in Central Europe as an endeavor to counteract the aggressive push of Pan-Germanism. To the east, he recognized the immense importance of a Russian ally, yet held a deep mistrust of the monarchy. Consequently, he welcomed the emergence of the Russian Republic, which even aimed to be socialist, and eventually accepted the Soviet Union's retreat from European politics. Initially, Masaryk hoped for a non-existent solidarity among Central European Slavic states. When this proved illusory and the creation of a corridor to Yugoslavia seemed unfeasible, he was compelled to rely on a convergence of interests with powers that sought an ally behind Germany. This vision appeared viable during the Versailles Peace Conference: France desired an ally to the east of Germany, and, influenced by Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), British geopolitics embraced a contentious new dictum:

> "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
> Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island;
> Who rules the World-Island commands the world" (Mackinder, 1962, p. 150).

However, Masaryk did not adopt these visions for ensuring the existence of a small nation-state in Central Europe. With the loss of support from Russia and the impossibility of forging a corridor to Yugoslavia, he gradually reframed the world war as a struggle between theocracy and democracy in his writings. His humanism repudiated social Darwinism. In this vein, he wrote in *Nová Evropa* that "the Pan-Germans have turned history and sociology into zoology and mechanics – in alignment with the intimidation tactics practiced in this war" (Masaryk, 1920, p. 23). He believed that the world war pitted powers of medieval theocratic monarchism and absolutism, undemocratic and non-nationalistic ideologies against constitutional, democratic, republican states recognizing the right to sovereignty of all nations, both great and small. But he undoubtedly knew that

Tsarist Russia did not fit into the "theocracy versus democracy" paradigm and that, for example, the suffrage systems in Germany and Austria-Hungary were among the most liberal before the Great War. Masaryk's ideological framing of the causes and meaning of WWI coincided with his realization that the self-determination of nations was seldom discussed as a reason for the conflict.

Masaryk's (1920) thinking was always fundamentally rooted in humanism, which differentiated him from the views of Palacký and Štúr. He linked democracy, socialism, and nationality. "Democracy, like nationality and socialism, is based on a humanitarian principle: No man should use another as a means to his ends – this is the moral essence of the political principle of equality and equity," Masaryk wrote in *Nová Evropa*, echoing Kant.

> For him, democracy was a societal organization founded on labor. In his vision, a democracy should not have people or classes exploiting the work of others; militarism and secret diplomacy were alien to a democratic state, and both domestic and foreign policies should be subjected to parliamentary review and direction (Masaryk, 1920, pp. 209–210).

Masaryk (1919) recognized that the new European order, based on the national principle combined with historical rights, would result in significant minorities within nation-states. From his worldview, he did not see this as a fundamental problem.

> The Czechs have always demanded equal rights, not superior ones. Given our central position, it's in the interest of the Czechs to grant equal rights to the Germans as well as to the other smaller minorities. Common sense demands it. It won't contradict the spirit of the proposal that the rights of national minorities will be approved and secured by an international tribunal (Masaryk, 1919, pp. 13, 7).

On the other hand, Masaryk never deviated from his stance that the Slovaks "are part of the Czech nation," although "in the 18th century, they adopted their own dialect as a literary language" (Masaryk, 1919, pp. 13, 7).

Masaryk thought of revising the historical borders of Bohemia in favor of the German minority, even after World War I. He entertained the idea of a different, more favorable boundary for Hungary along the southern border of Slovakia. Yet, during his speech to the Revolutionary National Assembly in December 1918 – delivered partly in Slovak – he clearly articulated his vision for the life of Hungarian minorities in the new Czechoslovakia and the nature of the Slovak–Hungarian border: "Hungarian minorities will enjoy all civil rights. Hungarians were cruel enough to say, 'A Slovak is not a human being' – we will not repay them with evil, but only wish for Slovakia to have boundaries conducive to its prosperity" (*Dějiny*, 2005, p. 394).

Masaryk succeeded in his efforts to establish a nation-state. However, he keenly felt that in the shifts of power balance – alliances with non-German Western powers, Slavic solidarity, and the democratization of political life – a small state in the heart of Europe would not stand protected. He therefore explored other ways of safeguarding national interests, turning back to Palacký's ideas of federation, but on a Pan-European scale. For instance, in his book *World Revolution* (1925), he somewhat prematurely opined:

> Despite all the challenges, it can be said that the beginning of a free European federation is emerging in place of the absolutist rule of Europe by a single superpower or an alliance of superpowers in mutual conflict. In such a new Europe, independence for even the smallest national identities can be ensured (Masaryk, 1925, pp. 475–476).

On the eve of Hitler's rise to power, Masaryk believed that if a French-German-British cooperation in Europe could occur, all the dreams we have, like Pan-Europe, might one day materialize. As late as March 1933, he stated that if he were young, he would do everything in his power to "help advance the idea of forming the United States of Europe" (Opat, 1999, pp. 37– 38).

## Loss of Future

The collapse of the European power balance, established after the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, buried Masaryk's initial vision of securing the existence of the nation-state. Czechoslovakia's liberal-democratic allies signed the Munich Agreement; Slavic Poland joined in support of the Munich dictate. The Little Entente, a Czechoslovak-Romanian-Yugoslavian alliance against Hungarian revisionism, could not replace the original concepts of foreign security guarantees for Czechoslovakia's existence.

According to some scholars, the gradual disintegration of Czechoslovakia following the Munich Agreement highlights the shortcomings in Masaryk's vision of a nation-state. Given the debates of that era focused on protecting Czech national interests, it is indeed difficult to pinpoint a unified state ideology for Czechoslovakia. The principle of self-determination seems inconsistent with the inclusion of sizable German and Hungarian minorities in the newly formed Czechoslovakia.

When it comes to Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the following questions emerge: What is the best way to guarantee a nation's right to self-determination? Should this be through a referendum, elected representatives, or some other mechanism? While historical rights might define the borders of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown and the northern frontier of Slovakia, they fall short of justifying the merger of Czech lands, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Ruthenia into a single entity.

Furthermore, the emphasis on regional assemblies, which historical rights underscored, was entirely negated by the creation of Czechoslovakia. The assemblies for the Czechs, Moravians, and Silesians were dissolved. Additionally, the southern border of Slovakia does not align with the principles of self-determination or historical rights. That particular border did not even function as an administrative boundary within the Kingdom of Hungary. Rather, it is a strategic delineation established by the Treaty of Trianon, reflecting decisions made by the major powers.

All these points of contention speak to the view that the nation-states emerging in Central Europe after the fall of Austria-Hungary

and the Russian Empire were not born out of local visions like Masaryk's. Instead, they were shaped by the interests and compromises of the victorious powers within a new balance of global power.

The rise of German Nazism and the war it sparked were by no means inevitable. The Versailles system did not lock the world into a single path of development; rather, it presented multiple avenues for transformation that were ultimately not pursued. For instance, the Treaty of Versailles led to the establishment of the League of Nations and the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague. Naval conferences aimed to regulate armament, the Briand-Kellogg Pact outlawed war as a means of conducting foreign policy, and the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva even debated an elimination of offensive weapons.

It was not preordained that these potential pathways for a more peaceful international landscape would be abandoned. This had more to do with the inherent risks of civilizational development and the failure of political elites to adequately manage these risks. Therefore, to argue that the post-Munich events invalidated Masaryk's vision of the Czech state also necessitates an explanation of why similar challenges called into question the state ideas of Poland, France, and other countries. After all, these nations also faced temporary dissolution at the outset of World War II.

Developments in the second half of the 20th century showed that shifts in power dynamics depend on more variables than geopolitical mapping suggests. The three mentioned geopolitical imaginations primarily focused on the national interest of defense. After World War II, however, this focus was shifted to the strife between social and civic ideas: countries aligned with the Soviet Union emphasized transnational internationalism and social equality, while liberal countries aligned with the United States highlighted civic principles and individual freedoms. Even though the relations of these blocs adhered to the logic of power balance, it was not purely geopolitical realities that decided the downfall of the Soviet Union.

The trajectory of Czechoslovakia and its successor states, the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, appears to have looped back to the ideas of František Palacký, particularly in seeking the assurance of

their existence within the structures of the European Union and NATO. However, this comparison only holds up to a point; the resemblances are arguably more superficial than they are substantive.

Firstly, neither the European Union nor NATO can be seen as purely Central European institutions that would protect against pressures emanating from both east and west, as envisioned by Palacký. In essence, joining these Western institutions could be seen as a divergence from the 'Central European mentality' articulated by Milan Hodža. Organizations like the Visegrád Group, for instance, were less about preserving Central European uniqueness and more about expediting the member states' adoption of Western norms within the frameworks of the European Union and NATO.

Secondly, there is a stark contrast between Palacký's vision of a federal Austria and the present-day European Union. Palacký's Austria was designed as a conduit for realizing national interests and preserving cultural uniqueness. In contrast, a notable part of Czech and Slovak political elites see European integration as a civic process. Rather than safeguarding national interests, its aim is to form a new kind of European citizenship.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the deep discussions on the implications of history and the nature of national interest – conversations that were so crucial when different geopolitical visions were formulated in the past – are largely missing today. This absence suggests a lack of intellectual ferment that could explore the multiple dimensions and contingencies that define statehood and sovereignty in the region.

In the absence of such discourse, there is a risk that international relations might be reduced to a simplistic, social-Darwinian view that offers little solace or strategic direction for small states and nations. The absence of complex discourse could inadvertently pave the way for a form of international politics that is less considerate of the nuanced needs and contributions of smaller nations, thereby reducing them to mere pawns in a bigger game.

The feeling of individual freedom goes hand in hand with European balance and, consequently, with peace on this continent. The fate of the aforementioned three geopolitical imaginations suggests that this sense of freedom is tied to the conception and fulfilment

of social, national, and civic needs. Individual freedom must be balanced with social and national equality. The fate of countries under bureaucratic socialism demonstrated where an overemphasis on social equality over individual freedom can lead. Overvaluing an individualistically conceived civic principle over the national one also leads to many people feeling a lack of freedom and a threat to their personal identity. This is one reason for the growing unrest that is also reflected in international politics, in the power dynamics permeating Central Europe. The most significant of these dynamics run between the capitals of the great powers, and neither Czechia nor Slovakia can significantly influence their direction and energy. Just as in the times of František Palacký and Tomáš G. Masaryk, for small nations and states, the foundation for defending their interests has been and remains skillful diplomacy. It is a diplomacy of all azimuths, aiming to gain as many friends as possible and to have as few enemies as possible.

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