

Central Europe: the very idea. Riding the wave of the Age of Uncertainty

Abstract

This article constitutes the formal paper presented by the author to the SEER Journal symposium 'The European integration of the western Balkans' which took place in Belgrade on 19 May 2025. The article seeks to centralise a revised Central Europe as a contextualisation for our understanding of the current state of convergence, in conditions not least of the slowing of integration processes and the return of war to Europe. Drawing on philosophical traditions contemplating the meaning of democracy, and in particular a thoughtful and focused review of the importance of the writings of Jan Patočka, the Czech essayist, philosopher and Charter 77 spokesperson, as well as on fresh research and contemporary political developments, the author seeks to develop a novel approach to comprehending the widening divides within Europe and addressing them via a rethinking of the notion of 'Europe'. The author concludes that the way forward might lie in a combination of Patočka's philosophical writings and a consideration of the meaning of 'care' which, in turn, might allow reflection on the correct multifold approach.

Keywords: Central Europe, European integration, western Balkans, convergence, autocratisation, de-democratisation, Europeanisation, post-colonialism

Introduction

Since 2014, the slowdown of the European integration process of the former Yugoslav republics is taking place in a dramatically different geopolitical context and in another Age.¹ An Age that started, as did the previous one, the Age of Extremes,² with a war; again a 'war of positions', but this time on the Eastern Front, in Ukraine. Once more Heraclitus's dictum proves its veracity: '*Polemos* is the father of all...' ³ whose 'wavefront bears the world of humans toward its new destiny' (de Chardin 1965: 210).

This new Age almost impossible to capture as historical rhythms are characterised by instants, by facts that are incalculable and unpredictable in their own singularity. Today more so than in past 'history is nothing other than the shaken

- 1 This article relates to previous analyses presented in Sofia at the SEER anniversary symposium on 8 May 2018, published later in the *SEER Journal* (Solioz 2018a, Solioz 2018b) and then as further elaborated by the author (Solioz 2020, 2024).
- 2 Eric Hobsbawm distinguished the Age of Revolution (1789-1848), the Age of Capital (1848-1875), the Age of Empire (1875-1914) and the Age of Extremes (1914-1991).
- 3 In Greek mythology, the personified spirit of war and battle.

certitude of pre-given meaning' (Patočka 1996). How, then, can we predict the path of history in the making? Most certainly, this new Age cannot be understood in the same terms as the previous one – similar to the revolution introduced by quantum physics that cannot be properly understood through the lens of classical physics (Kojève 2025 [1932]).⁴

What is the resistance that we are facing?

Again and again it has been shown that society's attachment to its familiar and long-since-forfeited life is so rigid as to nullify the genuinely human application of intellect, forethought, even in dire peril. (Benjamin 1979 [1928]: 55)

Echoing Walter Benjamin's thought, Jan Patočka (1907-1977) pinpointed in the philosophical manifesto of Charter 77,⁵ written during the 'normalisation period' after the Prague Spring was put down (in 1968):

Today the danger is that knowing so many particulars we are losing the ability to see the questions and that which is their foundation. (Patočka 1996: 118)

Particularly nowadays, we have to dare to ask questions to which we do not have the answers and raise issues whose solution has yet to be found. 'To the depths of the Unknown to find something new!' (Baudelaire 1857). At stake: developing a new approach; saying things that would be radically different from anything said before – something that might seem impossible except that:

... in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand. (Baldwin 1993: 104)

Three driving ideas are followed in this article. First, that we are facing an Age of Uncertainty – or, 'Indeterminacy', being the proper term Werner Heisenberg intended in 1927 when he introduced the principle of uncertainty. Uncertainty is omnipresent in today's world on many levels and in science as an impetus towards reducing it as much as possible. The Age of Uncertainty is an era marked by indeterminacy, instability, movement, mutations, alterations and ruptures prefigured by the fate of transitional societies in Central Europe (Solioz 2024: 13, 208). This approach considers regime trajectories as well as the social fabric of a region and/or country as multidimensional meanderings rather than linear movements between autocracy and democracy and back.

Second, the very notion of 'western Balkans' is misleading. With the purpose of avoiding the legacy of Yugoslavia, it defines 'the region' by its relationship to the European Union, more specifically including those countries that have not joined the

- 4 In which Kojève explores the idea of determinism in classical and modern (quantum) physics.
- 5 Charter 77 was a civic initiative in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1976 to 1992, named after the document Charter 77 from January 1977. Among the leading figures: Jiří Němec, Václav Benda, Ladislav Hejdránek, Václav Havel, Jan Patočka, Zdeněk Mlynář, Jiří Hájek, Martin Palouš, Pavel Kohout and Ladislav Lis. Patočka served as spokesperson (see Krapfl 2013).

European Union but are supposed to. As the integration process progressed (Slovenia and Croatia becoming EU member countries), fewer were left to be targeted by the concept. This approach introduces a counterproductive split between the former Yugoslav republics and contradicts the Union's own regional cooperation narrative. Further, it acknowledges neither that the EU integration process has lost most of its pull effect and its credibility, nor that the broader Central European regional level should be taken seriously, not as an alternative but as a complementary level.⁶

And third, the Union's centre of gravity is shifting eastwards and Central Europe is back – reversing, at a political level, the core-periphery divide. Acknowledging, first, 'the Balkans' as an obsolete political concept (Todorova 2009) and, second, that the regional initiatives limited to the western Balkans have, so far, failed to produce the expected transformative effects (Mitrović 2025), Central Europe presents the nearest regional framework that – geographically, politically and culturally – makes sense for the former Yugoslav republics, independently of whether or not they are part of the Union.

Last but not least, many scholars and experts have convincingly adopted for almost twenty years this broader regional framework that tends to impose itself as a new promising way in which to understand the area and envision its future. Such a regional approach could be significantly boosted by studies on regionalism. Very unfortunately, these have been poorly acknowledged by both scholars, experts and politicians working on the Balkans and or Central Europe, producing studies that mostly remained entrapped in a narrative limited to the level of the nation state (Solioz 2017).⁷

Central Europe back on the map

Milan Kundera's question, "Is Central Europe Europe's central question?" (Kundera 1983) receives today a clear answer as Europe's centre of gravity is unquestionably shifting eastwards, to the centre. As pinpointed by Jacques Rupnik:

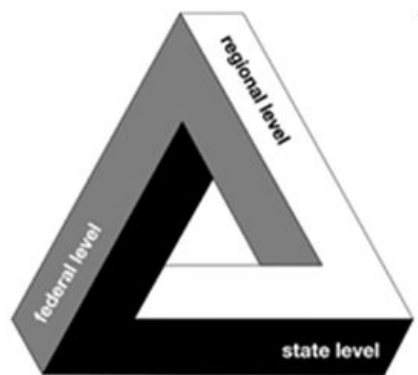
As the war redefines political borders and identities, we are being reminded that Lviv used to be Lvov before the second world war and Lemberg before the first world war, and part of Ukraine used to be in central Europe as Kundera understood it. Today, not just Lviv but the whole of Ukraine is leaning westwards, and its nearest west is central Europe. The irony of history is that by including Ukraine, central Europe – once Kundera's "kidnapped west" – is reinventing itself by expanding eastwards. (Rupnik 2023)

Of course, in some central European countries politics is shaped nowadays by the grip of autocratisation – a notion coined by the V-Dem Institute in the late 2010s (V-Dem 2021) – although this should nevertheless not be assumed to be a regional trend (see further below). More than ever, *staying with the trouble* – Donna Haraway's

- 6 As further discussed in Solioz (2024), autocratisation processes in the 'western Balkans' absolutely needs to be analysed taking into account similar or at least comparable developments in Central Europe.
- 7 My contribution to conceptualising the region and regionalism is contained in this reference – a book that also refers to the key publications on regionalism.

catchy title (2016) – offers us a watchword for the times ahead. But Central Europe cannot be reduced to that grip alone; a shared past and a set of common features link these countries, however different they may be. Additionally to the oft-mentioned six common denominators (Solioz 2024: 52-53), the involvement of central European regions and states in various regional-based cooperation programmes contributes to a significant intra-regional convergence and invites an acknowledgement of the in-betweenness of the regional, state and federal levels (see Figure 1).⁸

Figure 1 – The inbetweenness of the multiplicity of regional, state and federal levels



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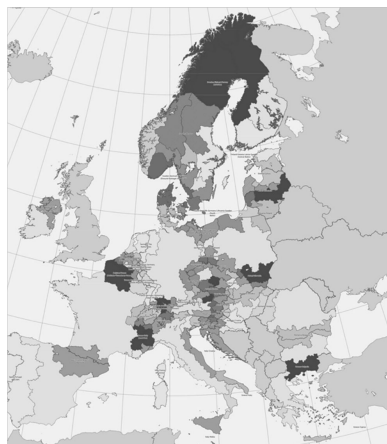
While the Visegrád Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), established in 1991, plays at state level a key role beyond the Union's accession process and tends, for decades now, to impose itself at the core of Central Europe (Balasz and Griessler 2020), a multitude of programmes stand for a similar dynamism at regional level as cross-border cooperation programmes (see Figure 2, map 1). Combining the region and the state levels, the transnational cooperation Interreg Central Europe programme illustrates their in-betweenness (see Figure 2, map 2).

In addition, Central Europe's intra-regional convergence may be illustrated by various indexes such as nominal labour productivity (see Figure 3, map 3) and, beyond a GDP-based approach, the EU regional Social Progress Index (see Figure 3, map 4). Studies published in 2025 focusing on the orthodox sphere (Dérens 2025) and on changing demography (Judah 2025) have also adopted this broader regional approach that is becoming an increasingly productive and convincing framework able to capture the convergences and divergences in Central Europe. One example will suffice here out of many: Tim Judah's investigation recalls the demographic trends that characterise Central Europe: a high emigration rate, a low birth rate and an ageing population, resulting in significant population decline. The Czech Republic, Slovenia and, to a lesser extent, Montenegro are the exceptions, Hungary is a case in point and Poland illustrates significant changes. The interest of this study

8 For a discussion of these different levels and their in-betweenness, see Solioz (2017).

lies precisely in the presentation of the demographic changes underway, considering both the common trends and the specific situation of each country.

Figure 2 – Maps 1 and 2

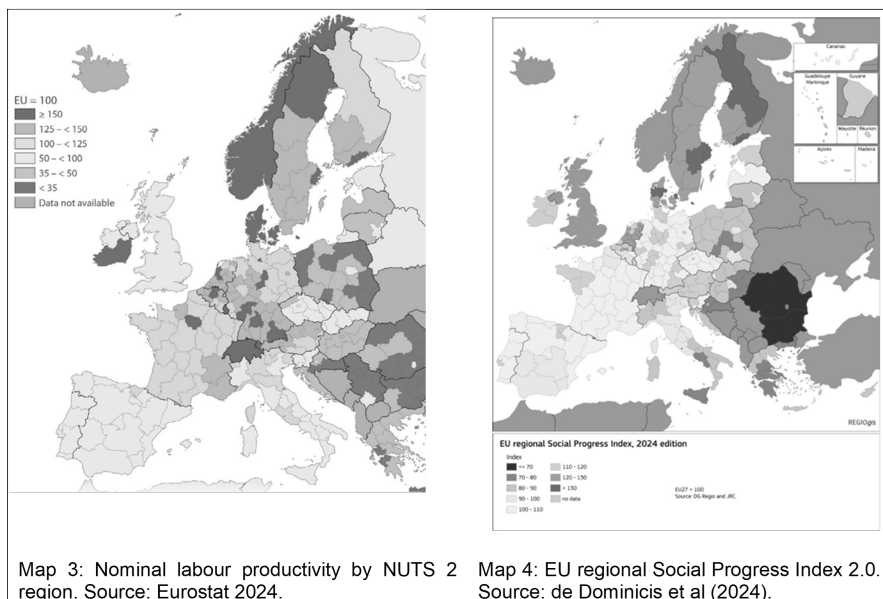


Map 1: Interreg VI A. Cross-border cooperation programmes, 2021-2022. © Eurostat



Map 2: Map of the area covered by the transnational cooperation programme Interreg Central Europe © DG Region, interact

Figure 3 – Maps 3 and 4

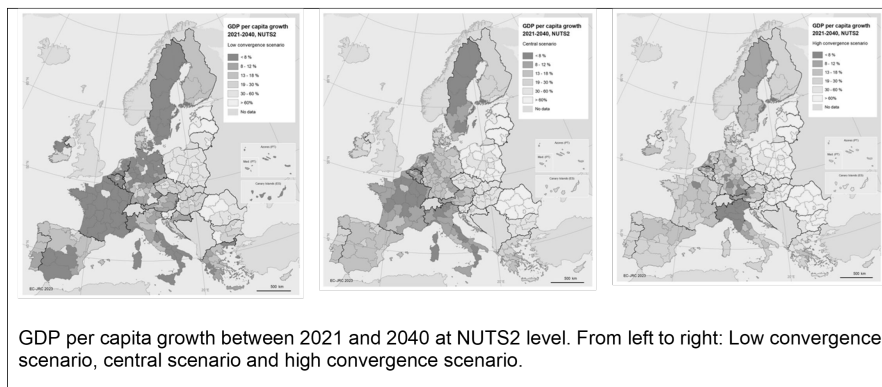


The widening east-west divide

Reviewing post-Wall Europe (1989-2008) in my extended essay *An Uncharted Transition* (Solioz 2024), I analysed how European integration produced a fragmented Europe and how the post-accession crisis of the 2000s further augmented the east-west divide and the core-periphery gap, and deepened divergence instead of augmenting convergence.⁹ Furthermore, the European Union cohesion policy has not shown any progress: regional economic convergence has stalled since 2009. Worse, projections suggest a moderate increase in regional economic disparities by 2040, with a significant amount of uncertainty. The report produced in 2024 by the Joint Research Centre on territorial cohesion (JRC 2024) presents three scenarios examined at the level of basic regions for regional policies (NUTS 2). Based on estimated GDP per capita growth in the period 2021-2040, three maps illustrate several scenarios highlighting substantial difference (see Figure 4).

9 Convergence and de-convergence, also beyond the 1989-2008 period, are extensively discussed throughout Solioz (2024).

Figure 4 – Maps 5-7



Source: JRC (2024: 23).

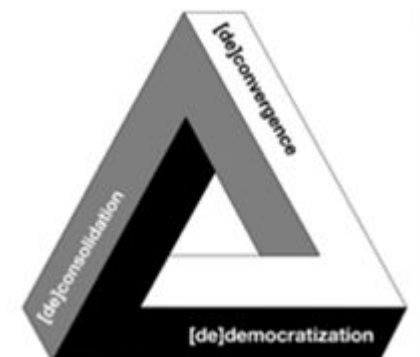
The high convergence scenario, the best case scenario:

... results in much more similar GDP per capita growth rates across regions within each country, and often with capital and more developed regions growing at slower pace than national average growth. (JRC 2024: 19)

How regional development policies will resume the convergence path is an open question as a result of the uncertainty in this outlook for economic convergence across the Union. These predictions clearly advocate the necessity to envision a reasonable degrowth. Considering the increase expenditures related to the war in Ukraine and the digital and green transitions, only economic degrowth combined with political growth might enable the Union to overcome the economic disparities.

The indeterminacy characterising convergence versus de-convergence also brands two other key polarisations: consolidation versus de-consolidation; and democratisation versus de-democratisation (see Figure 5). All three should be viewed as intertwined and as particularly sensitive to the crisis of the 2020s (Àgh 2021), to the Ukrainian war and, last but not least, to the third wave of autocratisation in Central Europe (Àgh 2022). Indeed in his earlier, 2021, work Àgh identifies three periods driven respectively by de-democratisation (early 2010s), autocratisation (mid-2010s) and de-Europeanisation (late 2010s), analysing how they have contributed to the deepening of the core-periphery gap. As others have also concluded, such a study can only point to Central Europe emerging as one of the world regions with the highest levels of democratic decline (V-Dem 2022).

Figure 5 – Europe’s political entanglement: the inbetweenness of convergence versus de-convergence, consolidation versus de-consolidation and democratization versus de-democratization



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This reloads the complex question of Europeanisation understood as a process of the construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, etc. Claudio Radaelli draws a line between notions that are often confused: first, ‘Europeanisation’ is not ‘convergence’, although it can produce it; second, nor necessarily does Europeanisation produce ‘harmonisation’, as regulatory diversity may be targeted; and third, Europeanisation is not ‘integration’. In the case of the latter, the focus of Europeanisation:

... brings us to other, more specific, questions such as the role of domestic institutions in the process of adaptation to Europe. (Radaelli 2003: 33)

Further, ‘Europeanisation’ should not be mixed with the consequences related to modernisation, democratisation, liberalisation and globalisation. Last, but not least, neither should it be mixed with the transition from command, centrally planned economies to the market economy and from communism to democracy.

Waves of autocratisation in Central Europe

Only thirty years has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, but at this point it seems to be ‘game over’ for the ‘victory’ of democracy. Among the Union’s paradoxes are that its resources are feeding the sustainability of autocratic elites in some Central European countries who are thus able to cement their hold on power and finance their patronage networks. The same ‘strategy’ can be recognised in former Yugoslavia, especially Croatia (an EU member country since 2013) as well as in Serbia (an EU candidate country since 2012), at the expense of stability in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Briefly put, the wave of autocratisation that the Union has confronted in Central Europe since the 2010s is also affecting forthcoming may-be new member states.

There are of course various reasons why the Union turns a blind eye to the serious violations of its rules and values. Among many, here are some:

- the autocrats have proved loyal servants of the neoliberal economic Europe of the North
- the short-sighted interests of multinationals (benefiting from the economic extension of the EU) became predominant
- the ‘international community’ considered autocracies as stabilising and adaptable rather than cronyist and corrupt
- the EU wanted to secure support for Ukraine (including sanctions against Russia) that required unanimity
- the Union has tended towards avoiding any possible new exit, thus preserving Union integrity
- the power of the status quo and therefore the pursuit of a ‘conciliatory approach’ in a predictable institutional and political environment.

The issue is sufficiently critical to require being taken seriously and, therefore, a conceptual clarification is first needed. Here, the definition proposed by *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization* is very welcome, in which the editors of the volume conceive autocratization:

... as the process of change toward autocracy and away from democracy within a political regime or between political regimes, which includes sub-categories such as democratic erosion or regression, democratic breakdown or collapse, and autocratic consolidation or hardening[.] [At the same time], the focus of the individual chapters rests naturally on more specific aspects – be it the modes or types of autocratization (e.g., democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, or autocratic hardening), its causes (structures, institutions, or values), the actors involved (e.g., social classes, civil society, or civilian and military bureaucracies), its implications for different social and policy outcomes, or its regional manifestations. (Croissant and Tomini 2024: 3)

Of course, autocratization is not bound by the East-West divide: it is also highly present in various forms in ‘western Europe’, not least in Germany where in May 2025 the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) classified the entirety of Alternative for Germany (AfD) as a ‘right-wing extremist organisation’.

To complete the picture, it is also worth mentioning that autocratisation is a global trend. As democratisation waves are followed by autocratisation ones, it seems that the world is facing democratic retreat.

This trend can, in part, be relativised by focusing on the democratisation, de-democratisation and re-democratisation processes (Solioz 2024). The recent evolution in Poland confirms such an approach – based as it is notably on Charles Tilly’s study (Tilly 2007). After a period of severe backsliding, Poland returned to liberal democracy with the election of Donald Tusk in the October 2023 parliamentary elections. Since then, the prime minister has engaged his country on the way back to democracy but Poland remains, nevertheless, deeply divided: the government is a liberal centre-right coalition, but the presidency continued to lay in the hands of

Andrzej Duda,¹⁰ close to the conservative nationalists of Law and Justice (PiS). He used two weapons to block reform: the right of veto; and, more subtly, preventing their entry into force until conformity with the fundamental law had been verified by the PiS-dominated Polish Constitutional Tribunal.

However, this did not prevent Tusk from playing a leading role at European level, inasmuch as we can speak of a ‘moment polonais’, as the French former diplomat Pierre Buhler (2025) argues. As previously, Poland is the ‘eastern shield of Europe’, but nowadays in a completely different geopolitical context and in a totally different position: as a fully-fledged member country of the European Union. No-one can despise Poland, as was too often the case in the past.

This does not in any way subtract from Tusk’s homework – to start with, the restoration of the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal – amounting to a Sisyphean task, not least in that the populist, Karol Nawrocki, backed by the Law and Justice party, won the 2025 presidential elections on 1 June 2025. This might well pave the way to creating a new right-wing coalition in parliament.

As Zselyke Csaky highlights:

Poland’s restoration of democracy does not offer a straightforward success story, but the EU should nevertheless pay close attention. What it offers is valuable lessons for countries at risk of backsliding. (Csaky 2024)

Despite Poland’s globally positive results, and Nicușor Dan’s win in the Romanian presidential election in May 2025, the ‘third wave’ of autocratisation is still rising (V-Dem 2025). How should this be viewed?

Licia Cianetti and Seán Hanley highlight the necessity of moving beyond a backsliding paradigm when considering countries whose dynamics follow ambiguous and intermediate patterns characterised as:

(1) bumpy, dynamic sequences of episodic crisis and confrontation falling short of the clash between authoritarian-minded illiberals and “prodemocracy” forces envisaged in accounts of backsliding (akin to what Slater has called ‘careening’); and (2) cases marked by tradeoffs between distinct democratic values, whose complex dynamics defy the ‘all good things go together’ logic that often informs thinking about democratization, backsliding, and the quality of democracy. (Cianetti and Hanley 2021: 73)

Consequently:

... if intermediate syndromes are more than mere stepping-stones on the way to paradigmatic backsliding, then different strategies of democracy promotion will be needed to address these cases – strategies that openly recognize the uncomfortable normative and political choices between stability, inclusivity, and contestation that practitioners may encounter on the ground. (Cianetti and Hanley 2021: 78)

10 President of Poland from August 2015 until May 2025.

In their 2024 contribution to *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*, the same authors relatedly conclude:

Although understanding its causes and potential spillover effects remains vital, Hungarian-style executive aggrandizement driving a transition to autocracy [is] still the exception. Other forms of partial or on-off democratic decline characterized by ‘hollowing’ or ‘swerving’ are more prevalent. (Cianetti and Hanley 2024: 484)

More nuanced scenarios, in which multiple trajectories coexist, must thus be envisioned. As indeed the Tillyian approach also provided an early opportunity to highlight, the prevalent pattern is that oscillation in democratic quality rarely translates into outright autocratisation processes. Cianetti and Hanley, however, also invite an additional consideration of the importance of temporalities:

... corruption-led and technocracy-led democratic patterns of degradation, for example, highlight temporalities that are both longer and less linear than conventional party-oriented perspectives, which see elections as triggers and turning points. (Cianetti and Hanley 2024: 484)

Long timescales and multiplex approaches matter!

This also corroborates the analyses in Solioz (2024) as it precisely points to the direction of the in-betweenness of democratisation versus de-democratisation and thus its indeterminacy. Compared to previous traditional types of autocracy, the ‘third-generation autocracy’ has produced hybrid regimes with the parallel development of formally democratic, but informally autocratic, forms of institution-building. Further thought needs to be given in this direction, including the often-neglected subnational dimension of autocratisation, as well as the multifaceted roles of civil society that can either inhibit or deter autocratisation, or otherwise sustain and feed it.

While the surge of anti-liberal populist ideas favours autocratisation processes, how can these be countered? A look in the rearview mirror provided by Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) might surprise with some very timely notes extracted here from his lecture at the Free University of West Berlin in July 1967:

The new fascism – if it comes – will be very different from the old fascism. History does not repeat itself so easily. When I speak of the rise of fascism I mean, with regard to America, for example, that the strength of those who support the cutback of existing civil and political liberties will grow to the point where the Congress can institute repressive legislation that is very effective. That is, the mass basis does not have to consist of masses of people going out into the streets and beating people up, it can also mean that the masses support increasingly actively a tendency that confines whatever scope still exists in democracy, thus increasingly weakening the opposition. (Marcuse 1970 [1967]: 100)

Already in his 1942 article ‘The New German Mentality’, inspired by his friend’s book *Behemoth* (1942),¹¹ Marcuse had explained why the traditional methods of counter-propaganda and education are obsolete. He first insisted on the necessity of:

... a thorough knowledge of the new mentality and the new language [as] a prerequisite for the effective psychological and ideological offensive against National Socialism. (Marcuse 1998 [1942]: 141)

He then characterises this mentality by integral politicalisation, integral debunking, cynical matter-of-factness, neopaganism, the shift of traditional taboos and catastrophic fatalism, before highlighting that:

... there is no warranted conclusion that the new mentality will disappear with the disappearance of the National Socialist regime. For the new mentality is bound up with a pattern of social organization that is not identical with National Socialism, although National Socialism has given it its most aggressive form. (Marcuse 1998 [1942]: 145)

Having discussed the novelty of national socialist logic and language, the psychological foundation of the new mentality, and the transformation of morale into technology, Marcuse goes on to address three effective counter-propaganda measures, three forms which dissolve the criticised mentality by responding to it: using first the language of facts; second, the language of recollection; and third, the language of re-education. To sum up:

The content and language of an effective counter-propaganda can neither be that of the New Order nor of the status quo but must develop a content and language of its own. They must respond, but not correspond, to the new mentality. (Marcuse 1998 [1942]: 147)

Marcuse picked up this argument again in the conclusion of *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, focusing on the role of the young generation:

Strategies must be developed which are adapted to combat the counterrevolution. The outcome depends, to a great extent, on the ability of the young generation – not to drop out and not to accommodate, but to learn how to regroup after defeat, how to develop, with the new sensibility a new rationality, to sustain the long process of education – the indispensable prerequisite for the transition to large-scale political action. For the next revolution will be the concern of generations, and ‘the final crisis of capitalism’ may take all but a century. (Marcuse 1972: 133-134)

Without giving in to the sirens of anachronism, it is important to take away from Marcuse’s contributions some useful insights and to retain the necessity to formulate new narratives of counter-propaganda in order to oppose and formulate an alternative to the new forms of control developed by post-disciplinary societies and/or control societies. The last section of this article turns to an exploration of how Jan Patočka’s ‘return to Europe’ offers thoughts that undo pretence and reopen a universe of

11 By Franz Leopold Neumann, a German lawyer and political scientist.

possibilities insofar as he reflects on Europe as a project coined by indeterminacy while being both constantly endangered and never-ending. This is a way of thinking yet to be discovered but whose significance for Europe's self-understanding is only now becoming apparent.

Looking for the new ground of Europe after Europe

Inspired by Edmund Husserl's philosophy, Patočka looks at Europe from a deep perspective which invites a contemplation of the subject from a more complex angle. While his *Plato and Europe* (2002) and *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (1996) are renowned and often quoted, not so much his thoughts on post-Europe which, until now, are only available in French, German and Czech.¹² The collective volume *Thinking After Europe. Jan Patočka and Politics* (Tava and Meacham 2016), however, shares insights into his views on the questions and challenges related to Europe. Against a background of the discussion of the fate of Europe in an Age of Uncertainty, it makes sense to integrate Patočka's thoughts on Europe after Europe. His sharp reflections can today reorient the question of Europe, philosophically and politically.

In a different context from that of the 1970s, Europe is nowadays once again at stake. What is more, many believe that Europe – between Sarajevo and Kyiv – has lost its soul. This is precisely the key issue of Patočka's farsighted analysis that stems from a critical, postcolonial turn towards Europe.

In order to avoid simplifications or misunderstanding concerning 'post-Europe', Tava and Meacham offer a clarification:

... thinking after Europe does not mean, neither for Patočka nor for ourselves, thinking without Europe. [Accordingly, post-Europe should be understood] as a new historical perspective, which humankind has to apprehend in order to face the ongoing crisis. (Tava and Meacham 2016: x and xii)

In this sense, post-Europe is still Europe, 'an unfinished adventure' (Bauman 2004), a Europe which is yet to come.

12 Editor's note: the English language quotes that follow are, as a result, as translated by the author.

Figure 6 – Map 8



Note: in dark blue: European countries that had colonial empires, the others being – if so – only marginally involved in colonisation such as was Austria briefly in the Nicobar Islands in 1778.

Stressing that Europe had lost its political primacy and its position as a world power, and was being relegated to the waiting room of history, Patočka anticipated the postcolonial narrative back in the 1970s, acknowledging sharply:

... the end of Europe as a historical power, the end of the entity which, rising above the rest of the world, had tried in vain to establish its domination over the entire surface of the planet. (Patočka 2007: 42)

In his writings which focus on the post-European historical era, Patočka distinguishes three levels:

1. the European principle (the reflection that grounds action and thought by insight)
2. Europe as a united political, social and spiritual reality
3. the European heritage (science, technology, rational economic and social organisations).

It is the generalisation of the latter that paved the way to the end of Europe as a historical world power – a process Patočka further elaborated based on Geoffrey Barradough (1956, 1967).¹³

Patočka sees during World War II and in the immediate post-war period the shift towards a scientific-technological rationality and the emergence of:

... a postcolonial world, formally Europeanised, but with new, non-European content. A world in which Europe has ceased to play a decisive role as a political and spiritual force. (Patočka 2007: 46)

A catastrophe? Not at all, inasmuch as:

... the post-European era is marked by a great possibility for humanity, one that could lead off into a future not only of technical understanding but also that of self-reflecting reason itself. (Patočka 2007: 53)

This presupposes a framework in which the European, the non-European and the post-European can all relate to and differentiate from one another.

What might characterise humanity in this post-European era? In Patočka's view, humanity must remain that which it was if it is to be capable of spirituality:

... an existing being, which does not close itself up but rather whose openness is its strength. (Patočka 1999: 28)

As Karel Novotný pinpoints, Patočka seeks to save the dimension of openness from the reductionism of techno-scientific rationality (Novotný 2016: 304). This openness necessitates a distancing of oneself from one's own spiritual tradition:

One cannot advance to make progress on the sketched problems [in *L'Europe et après*] of today's historical epoch without undertaking the attempt of a very radical distancing from the traditional, European ways of viewing world history. (Patočka 1999: 243)

Michel Agier's anthropology of the cosmopolitan condition, focused on 'decentring', can illustrate what Patočka alludes to in generic terms:

The challenge posed to us all now is thus not only to 'de-Westernize' universalism, to 'de-nationalize' or 'de-ethnicize' thought and action in a decentred world. It is above all to succeed in conceiving a common world, in which the programme of equality must be reinvented, with a cosmopolitan narrative on the first page. (Agier 2016: 157)

Patočka considers the complementarity of multiple traditions as a prerequisite:

... the possibility of an accumulation of cultural achievements depends essentially on the existence of contacts between traditions of different types, and the probability of such an

13 Patočka notes that neither Barradough nor Herbert Marcuse fail to escape a certain Euro-centrism.

accumulation presupposes the maintenance of this diversity of fundamental perspectives in which people realize their lives and give shape to their history. (Patočka 1990: 213)

When it comes to the break with one-dimensional society, thus the dominance of scientific-technological rationality, non-European cultures are better equipped. Consequently, Patočka advocates:

... a debate with the cultural traditions that provide an indispensable factual foundation for the European idea, traditions hitherto considered dead and insignificant but which we must learn to take seriously. (Patočka 1990: 212)

To sum up with the philosopher's own words:

A new, extended, much less naïve Socratism would then be required, a new asceticism and an entirely new courage cultivated from the battles, the labour and the blood of the most abominable time of war, to escape the threat of meaninglessness. At the bottom this would be the very same meaning historical mankind has always been striving for by breaking away from the twilight of the prehistoric acquiescence of meaning and embarking on an adventure where infinitely much could be lost but where enough could be gained so that it was worth the effort: the life in truth, the life of spirit.¹⁴

Herein, one of the key issues which Patočka develops is the Socratic motif of 'care for the soul' – the key concept coined by Plato in the *Phaedo*. The ancient Greek philosopher discovered that:

... metaphysics is essentially *practical*, and therefore linked to a possibility of *life in common*, and that concern for the soul is ultimately concern for human life *within a state*. Not of course in any old state; indeed, in a state that does not yet (actually) exist, a state of justice, where, consequently, the political function is specialized. (Patočka 2007: 273; emphasis by Patočka)

Conclusions

It is time to draw a line under our analysis, with some (unavoidable) simplification. 'Care for the soul' might be expressed in more general terms as the 'care' that proposes a different ontology, a different epistemology and a different account of social theory (Tronto 1993; Care Collective 2020). For the sake of brevity, the very global definition formulated by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher will suffice:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto 1993: 103)

- 14 This quotation is taken from the partial German translation of the *Heretical Essays* that Patočka (2016) himself realised. The quoted passage replaces the conclusion of the original version of his essay 'Does history have a meaning'. Quoted after Novotný (2016: 311).

This opens new perspectives to be further investigated – with the added value of overcoming the intrinsic threat of Eurocentrism, a risk of which Patočka was consciously aware.

The structural indeterminacy characterising politics, the current slowdown of the Union accession process, the ‘Balkan Malaise’, the autocratisation waves and the return of high intensity war in Europe, not to forget the magnitude of the ecological threat – all of these things require a multifold qualitative approach. Enabling Europeans to live in ‘problematicity’, to ‘stay with the trouble’ and in ‘being-with’ – in learning to do this some inspiration might well be found in a combination of Patočka’s political philosophy and the care approach.¹⁵

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15 The suggested framework would bring under the same roof the different approaches presented in Solioz (2024).

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