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# Res novae



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*Laris Gaiser*

REPLACING SELF-DETERMINISM:  
FINDING A WAY BEYOND CENTRAL EUROPE'S FRICTIONS  
AND ITS SLOVENIAN LEGACY

*Simon Malmenvall*

PRAVNA IN EKONOMSKA UREDITEV PRAVOSLAVNE CERKVE V KIJEVSKI RUSIJI

*Karmen Marguč*

INDEKS TRAJNOSTNEGA RAZVOJA KOT ALTERNATIVA RAMSEYJEVI FORMULI  
PRI IZBIRI MED DOLGOROČNIMI PROJEKTI

*Sebastijan Valentan*

OB 70. OBLETNICI RAZGLASITVE SPLOŠNE DEKLARACIJE OZN O ČLOVEKOVIH PRAVICAH:  
VERA V JAVNOSTI KOT TEMELJNA ČLOVEKOVA PRAVICA

*Pia Valenzuela*

NORMATIVNOST IN TRANSCENDENCA NARAVNEGA PRAVA:  
PRIMERJAVA PRISTOPOV TOMAŽA AKVINSKEGA IN FRANCISCA SUÁREZA

**Fakulteta za poslovne vede, Katoliški inštitut**  
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# Vsebina

*Laris Gaiser*

Replacing Self-Determinism: Finding a Way beyond  
Central Europe's Frictions and its Slovenian Legacy

**7**

*Simon Malmenvall*

Pravna in ekonomska ureditev pravoslavne Cerkve  
v Kijeviski Rusiji

**25**

*Karmen Marguč*

Indeks trajnostnega razvoja  
kot alternativa Ramseyjevi formuli  
pri izbiri med dolgoročnimi projekti

**44**

*Sebastijan Valentan*

Ob 70. obletnici razglasitve Splošne deklaracije OZN  
o človekovih pravicah: vera v javnosti  
kot temeljna človekova pravica

**76**

*Pia Valenzuela*

Normativnost in transcendenca  
naravnega prava: primerjava pristopov Tomaža  
Akvinskega in Francisca Suáreza

**97**

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## **Replacing Self-Determinism: Finding a Way beyond Central Europe's Frictions and its Slovenian Legacy**

**Abstract:** More than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a period characterized by the revamping of confrontations between historical national interests in Central Europe, a geopolitical buffer zone between Western and Eastern European powers has made its way back again into consideration as of primary strategic importance. The Wilsonian concept of self-determination has considerably, mainly in a negative way, influenced the capacity of Central European nations to cope with international challenges. Since the end of the First World War, world leaders have been trying to mitigate and prevent dangerous regional frictions. This article proposes to show that a politically fragmented Central European environment has always been seen by international players as a problem for global stability and that its unification is still a critical issue today. This is an issue that has heavily involved the Slovenian intellectual world in the past and will be addressed using principles set down by James Madison in *Federalist* no. 10.

**Key words:** Central Europe, Mitteleuropa, fragmentation, cooperation, intelligence, Pan-European movement

### **Preseči pogojenost s samim seboj: najti pot onkraj srednjeevropskih trenj in slovenska dediščina te poti**

**Izvleček:** Več kot dve desetletji po razpadu Sovjetske zveze in v obdobju pomembnih sprememb v mednarodnem sistemu se Srednji Evropi – ki je od nekdaj geopolitično tamponsko območje med zahodnimi in vzhodnimi velesilami ter v kateri se soočajo močni državni interesi – ponovno pripisuje izjemen strateški pomen. Pravica do samoodločbe, ki jo je oblikoval Woodrow Wilson ob koncu prve svetovne vojne, je pretežno negativno vplivala na sposobnost srednjeevropskih držav za soočanje s pomembnimi mednarodnimi izzivi. Od konca prve svetovne vojne poskušajo svetovni voditelji nenehno preprečevati oziroma blažiti srednjeevropska regionalna trenja. Ta članek želi dokazati, da so mednarodni voditelji vedno dobro razumeli nevarnosti, ki jih za globalno stabilnost prinaša politično razdrobljena Srednja Evropa; da je njeno združevanje še danes pomembno vprašanje; da je v to vprašanje, tako kakor v preteklosti, močno vpleten tudi slovenski intelektualni svet in da morajo morebitne rešitve upoštevati temeljna načela, ki jih izpostavlja James Madison v dokumentu *Federalist* št. 10.

**Gljučne besede:** Srednja Evropa, Mitteleuropa, razdrobljenost, sodelovanje, obveščevalna dejavnost, Panevropsko gibanje

## Introduction

Discussing the political importance of closer cooperation among Central European countries is always a problem because, as in any serious research, it should start from a clear drawing of the region's borders. However, the exact definition of Central Europe's physical borders is a vexata questio having about as many solutions as there are scholars involved in the issue. In his illuminating essay published in 1992, »Central Europe / Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions«, Okey masterly synthesized the transcendental elusiveness of such a definition. Unfortunately, the region never experienced a conventional definition, because it was not a matter of conventional power. It has always been an idea used by different groups for their own purposes. For the author of this article, the idea of a Central Europe or Mitteleuropa can be linked back to Czech novelist Milan Kundera's (1984) idea of a place between Russia and Germany where both extremes are excluded and that, according to Konrad (1984), is linked to an »anti-political« identity as a symbolic challenge to the power bloc system that knew only an East and West, whose relations always deeply influenced the local redistribution of powers. From a cultural point of view, that originally influences any anthropological approach to a geopolitical issue, it is the spirit shaped by an aesthetic sensibility that allows for complexity and multilingualism, a strategy that rests on even understanding one's deadly enemy, a spirit that consists of accepting plurality as a value in and of itself. It is the place where the relationship between the »I« and the world as attitudes towards history, law, and human dignity was different from elsewhere (Busek and Brix 1986) given that the Central European is an intellectual unswayed by the nationalist considerations of mass culture.

The quintessence of such an approach could be found, and loosely defined – as the Cambridge Dictionary (2008) does – in the former Habsburg Empire, whose capital Vienna shaped, through centuries, the weight of historic-cultural affinities together with geographical proximity and intellectual interchange. This article will skip the paradox of not having a priori one commonly accepted definition of Central Europe, accepting all the possible definitions formulated throughout history that excludes Russia and Germany and connects the capital cities of the »middle region« in diverse ways. This is because, indifferent to the exact definition of boundaries, the problems posed by political fragmentation, and its consequent solutions, are ascribable in a comparable manner to any hypothetical, future type of configuration of inter-State coordination. This research does not want to find a solution to the borders but only to emphasize that fragmentation poses problems requiring concrete solutions.

In recent years, a feeling of dismay has enveloped the region's capitals. After the euphoria of the early nineties of the twentieth century, generated by the collapse of communist regimes, the regained independence of some states, or the creation of new ones as was the case with Slovenia, politicians and citizens began to understand that being small, divided, and riotous brings great disadvantages. After the period when Russia was a giant with feet of clay, and where only the prospect of entry into the European Union was a guarantee of stability, there are problems linked to the fact of being, always, a friction zone between different spheres of influence. In Central Europe, history and geography are again returning to prominence.



### **A disruptive Wilsonian legacy: the cause of the problem**

At Versailles in 1919, United States president Woodrow Wilson introduced the world to a particular formulation of national self-determination and unwittingly unleashed a concept that continues to this day to pose obstacles by turning big nations into small ones, fomenting civil wars, and dooming first the League of Nations and now the United Nations to an unwieldy structure that at times appears to be nothing more than a debating society of two hundred supposedly equally sovereign members. Wilson exacerbated the instability of a region and legitimized the concept that there should be a state for every nationality. Even neo-Wilsonians like Robert McNamara, have admitted that Wilsonian national self-determination begat the seeds of violence in which well over a hundred million people perished as a direct consequence of war in the dismembering the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. (Levy 2007)

In his unpublished manuscript »Disintegration, Conflict, and Wilsonian Self Determination«, Harknett (1995) compared Wilsonian and Madisonian approaches toward democracy, concluding that Wilsonian national self-determination was an unsound method of achieving democratization and that a neo-Madisonian approach based on the consent of the governed shall always be more desirable. This approach was later deepened and the thesis broadly analyzed by Levy who tried to prove that the indications given by James Madison, the fourth president of the United States of America, in his *Federalist* no. 10 were much more applicable for shaping a working democracy than the Wilsonian ideas collected in the famous »Fourteen Points« on which the new world order was

supposed to be established after the First World War. *Federalist* no. 10 noted that disagreements about matters such as religion are fertile grounds for inflaming mutual animosities and violence. And while national self-determination was likely an unknown concept to Madison, the *Federalist* no. 10 offers a cure for all forms of division: a federal – for Madison was involved in U.S. constitutional processes, republicanism – system in which there is a fair allocation of representation among competing factions. Central Europe owing to its complex history and diverse composition is rife with factions of every stripe: political, ethnic, economic, and religious. But each faction may either be a curse or a saving grace as the region is also particularly well suited to a federal system of government. Due to the numerous national groups, no one faction could predominate by sheer numbers should they be inserted into a federal, democratic context. Both Wilson and Madison espoused a democratic form of government but as explained by Madison, no matter how well-intentioned a democracy, it will be inevitably overwhelmed by faction and eventually reduced to violence, civil war, and ultimately oppression unless measures are taken to mitigate and control factional urges. Woodrow Wilson, in contrast to Madison, ignored the problem of faction and instead concentrated on democracy based on national self-determination. The centuries-long oppression of Poles, Czechs, Serbs, and others at the hands of the German, Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires were remedied at Versailles by fashioning new states based on ethnicity. Unfortunately for the national aspirations of the new states, the countries created were not wholly homogenous in ethnic composition and internal factions based upon nationality flourished. (Levy 2007, 11)

According to Madison, »the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction«. For him a faction was »a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community«. To Madison – who was certainly influenced by David Hume's previous publications – there were only two ways to control a faction: to remove its causes and to control its effects. The first is impossible. There are only two ways to remove the causes of a faction: by destroying liberty or to give every citizen the same opinions, passions, and interests. Destroying liberty is a cure worse than the disease itself, and the second is impracticable. The causes of factions are thus a part of the nature of man and we must deal with their effects and accept their existence. Factions are easier to consolidate their strength in small countries where a leader may be able to influence state governments to support unsound economic and political policies as the States, far from being abolished, retain much of their sovereignty. For Madison, large democratic countries are the solution: factions can be numerous, but they will be weaker than in smaller democracies. Consequently, the Woodrow Wilson and James Madison approaches toward democracies tend to fundamentally differ being self-excluding. Wilson's emphasis on nationality as the driving force of democratic self-determination was misguided because it tended to accentuate existing divisions and deviated from the established success of the concrete American experience.

## Interwar games

In 1923, Coudenhove-Kalergi wrote his manifesto »Paneuropa«, the first document to talk about a federated Europe as a unique possible solution for a dismembered post-war Continent that would become, three years later, the cornerstone of the creation of the International Paneuropean Union. The Paneuropean Union, founded in Vienna by almost two thousand delegates coming from all European countries,<sup>1</sup> transformed itself into the driving force shaping a pro-federal intellectual environment and influenced many political leaders, convincing them of the ineluctability of a common continental destiny. The Paneuropean Union released a general federative spirit influencing many regional approaches that should have been channelled into a dynamic revolution across Europe. (Dorril 2000) Among the most important politicians influenced by this new spirit, as testified by an open acknowledgement to Coudenhove-Kalergi ideas in his famous Zurich speech in 1946, was Winston Churchill. (Watson 2016) During the Second World War, the British politician became a believer of the need for a European federation as a realpolitik tool strengthening Euro-Atlantic relations in opposition to the Soviet threat; even before that moment, he showed his understanding of Central European geopolitical frictions by supporting different organizations

- 1 Slovenia, although being a constitutive part of the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, sent its own delegation led by Anton Korošec (at that time vice Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of the Kingdom) and Andrej Gosar who would later become the first president of Slovenian Paneuropean movement. The foundation of the Paneuropean Union, an international organization, was, until 1991, the only political act carried out by Slovenian representatives as a subject of international relations.

dealing with potential federative solutions in the broad Central European region.

In the interim of the interwar period, there were several proposals of political unions in Central Europe, each of them answering to specific local interests. In Poland, General Pilsudski tried to reshape Greater Poland incorporating Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus in his anti-German and anti-Soviet idea of Intermarium; the Hungarians tried to propose a Danubian Federation, while French military intelligence, using the Grand Orient Masonic Lodge as a front, supported the Czech spearheaded Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia). None of these proposals proved to have any real substance and the Soviet Union and Germany became the beneficiaries of Central European disunity at the dawn of the Second World War.

During the Second World War, it was MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service, that, serving a government led by Winston Churchill, supported and re-launched the idea of a Central European Federation under the leadership of an organization called the Central European Federal Club. The British prime minister, long a supporter of an East-Central European federation, was desperately searching for a way to block Soviet domination of East-Central Europe, the political calculus of the past twenty-five years indicated that only a united movement could resist Stalin. By 1947, in addition to England's MI6, American (CIA, CIC-Army Counterintelligence, State Department), Ukrainian exiles, and French (Deuxieme Bureau) intelligence services were sponsoring East-Central European federal organizations. (Levy 2007, 27)

Having western intelligence support a pro-democratic and anti-Fascism commitment was only one part. Both Roosevelt, but especially, Churchill supported the effort to federalize East-Central Europe, but there was one very important party who vehemently objected, Stalin. Despite all the best intentions, the Cold War took its toll on the East-Central federal movements and almost all of them lost financial and material support by 1950 with British and French closing their funding and Stalin in control of the region. In the end, people and organizations could only merge into CIA controlled anti-Communist fronts.

### **The Slovenian footprint**

The Central European Federal Club was established in London in 1940 and reformed in 1945. Other connected branches were established in Rome, Paris, and Brussels communicating with each other as partners in a great debate. It was the Rome Club which introduced the idea of a Confederation of the Intermarium, a union of all countries between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. The leaders of the organization, all early supporters of varying degrees of Coudenhove-Kalergi Pan-European federalism, agreed on a federal organization having common foreign and defense policies with close collaboration in the economic field. (Lane 2005) If the original pre-war Intermarium idea was a tool of Polish national interest headed against Western and Eastern powers, it was now a concept sponsored by MI6 opposing Communism and Soviet Union appetites.

A fact that was confirmed by Brown (1988) highlighted that the Intermarium proclaimed the necessity for a powerful

anti-Communist, pan-Danubian Confederation and that, already before the war, it had received staunch support from both French and British intelligence agencies for anti-Communist operations. The Club released a »Charter« in 1945, a proposal for a »Treaty« in 1947, and irregularly official *Bulletins*. Thanks to these *Bulletins*, today we can know the identities of those who belonged to the Central European Federal Club. The Presidium was composed of two Slovenians and one Polish politician. Miha Krek, former minister of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and a high-ranking member of the Allied Government during the Second World War, was President, Julius Poniatowski the Vice President, and Ciril Žebot the Secretary-General.

Dorril (2000), basing his opinions on information contained in *Aarons' Sanctuary: Nazi Fugitives in Australia* (1989), describes Krek as a covert German agent. Thanks to the convincing Levy historical analysis and personal interviews with retired American intelligence officer William Goven the »worst« that can be said about Krek was that he worked with British intelligence to subvert Slovenian fascist organizations against the Germans. (Levy 2007, 183)

Ciril Žebot – whose father Franjo, deceased in Dachau, was an official of the Yugoslavian Army arrested by the Germans – fled to Rome in 1943 when the central part of the Slovenian territory passed from Italian to German occupation and was a convicted anti-German fighter that acted for his whole life as a booster of Slovenian independence from Yugoslavia. Krek and Žebot together with Poniatowski were the official representatives of the Central European Federal Club that issued the »Charter«, in which many of principles later adopted by the European Communities can be found for the

first time within a political proposal framework for a true democratic federal State of equal pooling sovereignty. Krek and Žebot also prepared the *Bulletins* detailing the then current situation in the countries of the proposed Intermarium in a series of interesting reports which also documented Soviet atrocities in the Baltic region; especially the one dated January 1947, in which, while acknowledging the de facto established balance of power on the field, they stated that »status imposed by force cannot last a long time« when East-Central Europe had legitimate aspirations to liberty and self-governance. In pursuit of the policy of provoking the inevitable Soviet collapse in East-Central Europe, the *Intermarium Bulletin* espoused six principles of foreign policy: integrity not dishonesty, moderation not hegemony, mutual help and mutual respect, justice and solidarity. By using these principles, the exiles hoped to vex the Soviets and earn international respect.

### **Still in search of a solution**

Today, Intermarium and Mitteleuropa are returning concepts. In absorbing East-Central Europe, both NATO and the EU have unwittingly inherited the underlying tensions that surround national self-determination, a force that is both centripetal and centrifugal. The fluidity of international relations in this region is once again well represented by the triangle composed of the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea; Russia's return to the scene, the effectiveness of Turkish strategic depth, the prevalence of German economic influence, and U.S. strategic control will all make Central Europe one of the main fields of competition for global interests. By continually being subjected to the cur-



rents of others' national interests, especially to constantly find themselves at the mercy of the powerful capitals within the European Union which was supposed to be a safe harbor for the fragmented people of the continent but instead creates geopolitical tensions, Central Europe rebukes cultural perplexities and reveals the weakness of local political structures. (Gaiser 2016)

Recently The Atlantic Council (Umland 2016) relaunched the idea of an Intermarium as a security pact with economic ties to stabilize the region after the Ukraine crisis and the renewed Russian interest in reshaping a buffer zone between Moscow and North-Atlantic space. Poland and Croatia, both interested in establishing regional leadership under the U.S. mantle of approval, welcomed the project and together organized the Three Seas Summit in Warsaw in 2017 in the presence of U.S. president Donald Trump. In the strategic vacuum of pure European strategic thinking, considering that the excessive political friction between the countries of the region, if poorly managed, could easily become future outbreaks of serious international instability, the Slovenian branch of the pan-European Movement launched, in 2013 during its international conference co-funded by the European Commission, the idea of creating a Central European platform bringing together Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, based on a model similar to the Benelux Union. (Gaiser 2014)

This would allow the States to manage their cohabitation, favoring their infrastructural development as well as, most importantly, their ability to multiply pressure upon institutions in Brussels. The proposal, made in the presence of the President of Slovenian Parliament and welcomed by him,

came after a phase of informal consultations with the political representatives of the countries potentially involved and should have been launched at the end of 2016 in a conference in the presence of all the presidents of their respective national assemblies. The consultations confirmed the feasibility of a Mittel-European Benelux between countries already united in the past by a long tradition of common institutions, values, and culture.

In this way, the countries of the Visegrád group hoped to be able to get out of the stalemate they are in, due to the continuous mutual distrust that characterizes their meetings, the excessive power of Poland, and a proposed Austrian project that on the surface could never have been presented first without being accused of neo-imperialism. A conference launching a Mittel-European Benelux would have been eagerly accepted if it was organized by – as seen so far – an institution with a strong pro-European tradition like Paneuropa in a neutral state; one that was not a bearer of nationalist pretensions, such as the Slovenian one. To plead this case, at the beginning of October 2016, then-President of the Austrian Parliament and presidential candidate of the Republic, Norber Hofer, informally visited the President of the Parliament of Ljubljana. However, in the end, lacking a strategic vision from the Slovenian government, support was withdrawn, and the project consequently buried. (Gaiser 2017) Nevertheless, the different proposals formulated once again are proof of a constantly present need that pretends a solution to prevent from repeating the tragic history of Central Europe during the twentieth century, which consisted of bloody ethnic conflict, foreign invasion, and occupation.

## Conclusion

The history of East-Central Europe indicates that stability in the region is often short-lived and is subject to both the imperial ambitions of neighboring states as well as internecine factionalism. Almost one hundred years after the Versailles Treaty of 1919, Woodrow Wilson's legacy continues to hold Central Europe in its grip. By absorbing the countries of this region, both NATO and the EU have unwittingly inherited the underlying tension that surrounds the centripetal and centrifugal force that is national self-determination. Respecting the Union, Brussels' institutions could support the formation of new political entities of an intermediate level between Member States and the Union following the examples of Scandinavia or Benelux. The need for such regional coordination should be considered a priority in an environment such as Central Europe where the ability to create disorder is prevalent. An additional regional level of cooperation would realize the never fully applied principle of subsidiarity contained in the EU Treaties and express the hidden potential of the various macro-regional policies sponsored in the last decades by the European Commission. Countries, such as those enlisted by the Slovenian Paneuropean Movement, are characterized by a common history, culture, and political inheritance that come from centuries of common life within the Habsburg Empire. The proposed solution starts by the idea increasingly applied after 1989 to distinguish Central and Eastern Europe from Western Europe, while it had previously been almost exclusively used as an anti-Soviet concept. *Mitteleuropa*, a distinct historical and cultural area, can be seen as an attempt to reappropriate history in order to define an autonomous cultural sphere. (Delanty 1996)

A new common regional system of political and economic coordination could only facilitate reciprocal dialogue, stability, and development. As noted by Levy (2007, 28), federation not only makes sense from a historical, economic, and security standpoint but it is also compatible with both of the two leading theories of international relations: institutionalism and realism. A regional federation would not only effectively aggregate power, the major tenet of realism, but would be based on economic and democratic cooperation, the keystones of institutionalism. The European Union is a positive historical development, but it is very unlikely that the EU will ever transit from a hybrid international organization into the superstate of David Hume's idea of a perfect commonwealth proposed in 1752. Therefore, it needs to find the way to enable Member States to effectively share common responsibilities and circumscribe any flame of rivalries fueled by national self-determination or irredentism.

As proved by this research, Slovenian intellectuals have always played a leading role in proposing solutions for Central European instability. It is in the national interest of Slovenia, the youngest of all European States, to look for workable options that could bring peace and prosperity; bearing in mind the Madisonian principle of size, a size big enough to dilute any excessive partisan interest, and bearing in mind that any additional political construction shall be resilient, providing safe harbor from conflict in the event of the EU's inability to address future crises or even in the event of its collapse.

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