



THE POLITICAL CONCEPT OF *MITTELEUROPE* BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

Lt.Col. Assoc.Prof. Andi Mihail BĂNCILĂ, PhD*

The desintegration of the socialist states offered political leaders the chance to redefine the identity of their own nations. Even if the European Union, a creation of the occidental cultural space, represented the first option, a part of the leaders of central European states took very seriously the idea of rebuilding the economic and cultural space of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even after the disintegration of this political and economic system, the central European world continued to refer to the rules that defined it. Despite the attempts of the communist regime to rewrite the history of these nations, Mitteleurope remained a mark for the people of these lands and even became a viable option in a society that rediscovered their multicultural past.

Keywords: Mitteleurope; Central Europe; multiculturalism; collective identity; economic space.

The idea of a super-state structure in the middle of Europe appeared for the first time in front of the politicians and culture people during „The Great War”¹. The German politician and publicist Friedrich Nauman wrote in his book, „Mitteleurope”, published in 1915², about the need to create a political and economic structure with the help of the alliance between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire³. This alliance was seen as one that had the purpose to defend the cultural identity of the German people which was „threatened” by both the Russian and the Anglo-French on the East and West borders, as the author says⁴. At the same time, he mentioned that he was marked by the racial concepts from that time which said that the future of this federal state must be ruled by a people capable of producing benefits for the entire community⁵.

Regarding the administration of this new state, he considered that the two German empires must forget the conflicts from the past and work on forming this new structure. The author considered that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was the weak link of this alliance which was forced by the circumstances in 1867 to accept to share their space with the Hungarians. Analyzing the course of the war, Nauman felt that in the end Austria would most likely have to accept a new split by co-operating with the Slavs from the Eastern provinces⁶.

The German Empire was much better structured and adapted to the new conditions of development. He considered that the rhythm of development of the two nations was completely different. The German nation was focused on modern business in which they used the fundamental principles of the nation: punctuality, conscientiousness and modesty. The Austrians were anchored in the past, remaining faithful to the principles of feudal work organization⁷.

Prussia, the destabilizing factor of the balance of power in Central Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries

The first change of the relations of forces in Central Europe took place in 1742 when the small kingdom of Prussia occupied the region of Silesia⁸ (but not its Southern part later called Sudanes Silesia), a province mainly populated by Slavs and administered at that time by the Habsburg House. The annexation of this province brought, through its resources, an added value to the kingdom of Prussia which in this way could lay the foundations for a healthy economic development. The important coal and iron resources located here allowed Prussia to become a great industrial power in the first part of the 19th century, which helped them in military actions. The territorial growth of the Prussian state did not stop here. It participated alongside Austria and Russia in 1772 in what remained in history known as the division of Poland (the Polish state was divided among its neighbors in three successive stages 1772,

* "Ferdinand I" Military Technical Academy
e-mail: bancila.andi@gmail.com



1793 and 1795)⁹. Its disputes with the other big German power, Austria, took place throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of these confrontations ended with the military victories of Prussia, which almost every time thus added to its territories controlled by the Habsburg House¹⁰.

The revolution of 1848 rattled the old Habsburg Empire. Many of the politicians of the time came to the conclusion that the survival of this conglomerate of nations depended on the way it would be reorganized. Prince Felix Schwarzenberg, Prime-Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the empire between 1848-1852, contributed to the writing of the first Constitution of the country. This important document provided the reorganization in the independent provinces of the Habsburg monarchy. The main purpose of the new Constitution was to cancel the effects of the new "Constitution of Hungary", known as the "Laws of March", adopted by the Hungarians from Budapest during 1848. The Austrian document stipulated the separation from Hungary of the provinces of Slovakia, Transylvania and Croatia which were integrated by force to the Hungarians during the 1948 revolution¹¹.

With support from the Russian army and indirectly from the Romanians from the Apuseni mountains who opposed the integration of Transylvania into Hungary, Emperor Franz Joseph succeeded in defeating the powerful Hungarian insurrection. The ideal – promoted by the Hungarian intellectuals – of separation from Austria was not shared by the representatives of the other ethnic groups. An important thing to remark is that the Hungarian troops fought isolated from the other minorities. Yet, these did not help the Hungarian revolutionaries; on the contrary, some of them even fought alongside the imperial army.

The most important moment was the insurrection of the Romanians from the Apuseni mountains led by Avram Iancu who put up fierce resistance in front of the Hungarian troops (this space was the only area that could not be occupied by the Hungarian army during the period June 1848 - September 1849)¹². This happened due to the lack of flexibility of the Hungarians to accept the recognition of national and social rights for the other peoples of the empire.

After the defeat and disarmament of the revolutionaries, the imperial authorities posed the

problem of carrying out reforms meant to discourage the initiation of similar social movements. Being aware that they could not afford to economically and militarily support a dynastic medieval empire with dispersed territories, the regrouping in the Danube region of the forces available to the Habsburg dynasty¹³ was considered for the first time. The plan was to abandon some provinces (the main states of Northern Italy) and to initiate a reform of the rest of the territory on the basis of modern democratic principles.

Making this wish happen became harder especially as a result of the national re-awakening of some of the more culturally evolved peoples who wanted to obtain rights sooner than the Austrians were prepared to offer them. Thus, the imperial troops had to violently suppress many emancipation movements, the most popular being the insurrection in Prague in 1861.

With the consolidation of Prussian power in Central Europe after the second half of the 19th century France, Austria's traditional adversary for several centuries, radically altered its position towards the Habsburg Monarchy¹⁴. The defeats suffered by the two great powers at Sadowa¹⁵ and Sedan¹⁶ prompted many of the French scientists to actively participate in the creation of a distinct Austrian political and cultural identity which would compete with the German one. Since this moment the Austrian cultural identity became permanently associated with the space in southeastern Europe where, due to existing ethnic diversity, instability was a constant issue. In this underdeveloped economic space, the German culture of the Austrian state continued to be a guarantee of progress which would be later regarded as a stability factor. The permanent fear of Germany's military recovery prompted the great powers of that time, especially France, to continue to promote this clear separation policy between the two states.

By the Versailles peace treaty signed at the end of World War I, the unification of these two German states was forbidden¹⁷, the interdiction remaining in force at the end of World War II when Austria was again separated from the rest of Germany.

However, the dissolution of the old Habsburg Empire was rushed from the inside by numerous requests for local autonomy. After the proclamation of the Austro-Hungarian dualist state in 1867, the strong and influential Czech minority in



Moravia began to negotiate by peaceful means the achievement of equal rights to the two recognized peoples of the Empire¹⁸. This effort was successful in the year 1897 when the government led by Kasimir Felix Badeni proposed the introduction of the Czech language as a second official language in Bohemia. The initiative was not supported by the German population of the province, who triggered important street movements to undo this endeavor. Despite these pressures, the Czechs succeeded in obtaining a privileged status within the Austrian part of the Empire, but not equal to the Hungarians. This dispute showed that the Empire was not yet ready to evolve to a federal state, the list of national minorities was very long, and their unequal level of economic and cultural development did not create the conditions for their uniform functioning.

Inspired by the changes produced in the West, the representatives of the reformatory wing continued to identify a new formula for the preservation of the dualistic monarchy. Even though the movement of the Czech was not met with the initially estimated success, it was not waived and they continued to seek solutions for the co-establishment of Bohemia alongside Austria and Hungary in a new territorial administrative formula. The project became only partially reflected by the recognition of the autonomy of Moravia in the year 1906 (Introduction of Czech language education and the delimitation of school constituencies in the territory)¹⁹, but without a big impact on the functioning of the state. This desideratum did not solve the problems within the dualist state, the Southern Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Slovenians) represented a compact bloc, yet administratively divided between the two powers of the Empire (Austria owned territories inhabited by Slovenians, Croats and Bosnians, while Hungary held the largest part of Croatia and the predominantly Serb inhabited Voievodina). The establishment of a state of Southern Slavs seemed unfeasible, especially because of the strong opposition of the Hungarian government, which claimed the absurd idea of a Hungarian ethnic state. A special case was the setting of an autonomous Galicia (a province inhabited mostly by Ukrainians, but whose leadership was to return to the Polish minority) after the model of Moravia; however, the project was cancelled in 1914 by the outbreak of the war²⁰.

The project of establishing territorial autonomy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire based on the principle of self-determination of peoples

Pressured by the way in which military actions were evolving during World War I and aware of the time of the national revival of the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Austrian authorities sought to quickly identify solutions for the reorganization of the state. In support of this endeavor, many people of culture grouped up, embracing and advancing various theories.

Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal²¹ joined those in favor of the idea of federalization of the Empire by proposing the establishment of a multiethnic state operating on the basis of the principles of the Holy Roman Empire, to which it was the rightful successor. In his opinion, Austria had to leave the side of Germany, considered an impostor, and return to its original position as a bridge between the Mediterranean world and the Northern Europe. The alliance of the two German empires seemed somewhat unnatural as while Germany was the supporter of a project for setting an ethnic German state, Austria had remained the prisoner of the nationalities of its empire and promoted the concept of a multiethnic state built around the ruling dynasty.

The necessity of reforming the old Austrian Empire on the basis of the principle of national self-determination was frequently underlined by representatives of the Romanian nation from Transylvania, Banat, Bucovina and the Romanian territories of Hungary (Maramureş and Crişana), among which a prominent role was played by Aurel Onciu in Bucovina, Iuliu Maniu, Alexandru Vaida Voievod, Vasile Goldiş, Ştefan Cicio Pop and other prominent intellectuals. During the truce signed by the Romanian state in the year 1918 with representatives of the Romanian intellectuals, Central Powers advanced the fantasy idea of unifying the entire Romanian nation, including the Romanians from the Old Kingdom within the Habsburg state, thus creating a Romanian "Kronland".

The most profound analysis of this phenomenon was made, however, by the Romanian Aurel C. Popovici, a close friend to the heir to the throne of the dualistic monarchy Franz Ferdinand, who published in 1906 the Book of the United States

of Great Austria (Vereinigten Staaten von Groß-Österreich)²². He stressed the need to reorganize the Empire on the basis of federal principles (the model envisaged being Switzerland)²³, taking into account the ethnic share of each of the 11 ethnic groups.

According to his point of view, each nation would have had to govern itself by preserving its national identity in this way, but he also stated that it was absolutely necessary to maintain economic and political ties between the regions of Central Europe under the management of the Habsburg monarchy as a condition necessary to protect this area against external influences.

Revolution of 1848, at which time the authority of the Habsburg state could be reinstated only with the help of army troops from the Tsardom of Russia. The absence of a national conscience first led the Hungarians and then the Polish, Czech, southern Slavs and Romanians to seek to reconstruct their national identity.

Although many of the representatives of Romanians within the dualistic monarchy were convinced by the economic viability of the Central European area (Mitteleuropa), as a result of the persecution they were subjected to by the Hungarian authorities, they started to consider that the only chance to benefit of national rights was to



Figure 1 Model of the European Central state in Aurel C. Popovici's view²⁴

Despite the fact that such a project could have meant a significant contribution to rescuing the dualistic monarchy and even promoted Germany as a first-tier power, specialists failed to identify a quick solution to reduce multiple existing ethnic and religious differences in this space. The unity around the ruling dynasty, principle that had functioned for centuries, began to show its limits even after the

support the project of creating a Romanian national state. The Romanian population of Transylvania, Crişana, Banat and Maramureş declared on countless occasions its intention to participate alongside the three recognized nationalities (Hungarians, Transylvanian Saxons and Szeklers) in the management of the territories they inhabited. Every time their requests met the unequivocal



refusal of the Hungarian authorities who continued to practice a policy of erasing national identity.

Romania's entry into the war on the side of the Triple Entente clarified this dilemma and prompted most of the nationalist leaders to embrace the Great Romania project. The sacrifice of Romanian soldiers on the battlefield of World War I, together with the political support offered by Romanian allies, created the necessary conditions for the emancipation of the Romanian population of Austro-Hungary.

The culmination of the struggle of ages of the Romanians was the proclamation of the "Declaration of Independence" of the Romanian nation of Transylvania and the Hungarian country, read on 5/18 October 1928 by Alexandru Vaida Voievod in the Budapest Parliament: "Under the natural law that each nation can order, decide for itself and freely about its fate (...) the Romanian nation of Hungary and Ardeal wishes to make use of this right and demands accordingly for it too the right to – free from any foreign pressure – decide its own settlement among the free nations"²⁵.

The only national minority within the empire who did not wish to dissolve this amalgam of peoples and who was fully aware of the importance of preserving this great economic market was the Jewish community. Without an ethnic identity and not having a recent national history, the Jews in the dualist monarchy were the only ones who could understand the concept of supra-nationality. They could not join the principle of national self-determination promoted by US President Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles peace conference, as they lived scattered throughout the territory of the Austro-Hungarian state, without having the opportunity to set up a national state. Moreover, they did not benefit from the support of their own language, the members of this community being very easily confused with the ethnic group they lived in.

The largest concentration of Jews in Austro-Hungary, about three-quarters of the total, lived in the regions of Galicia (it represented 10% of the entire population) and Bucovina where their share reached 25%, and in Cernăuți where they represented the majority population (approximately 40% of the population of the city)²⁶. This community was fully integrated due to the fact that on their own initiative they had adopted the German language and were

part of the imperial administrative apparatus present in those provinces.

Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919), the author of the book *Mitteleuropa*, considered it was absolutely necessary to preserve this space in order to support German imperialism. Although initially he was one of the supporters of the colonial policy promoted by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, who aimed to replace England as great naval power, he later returned to this idea and supported the consolidation of the power of the German Empire on the continent.

In this sense, Central Europe dominated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire was the key that allowed German expansionism to the space in the east of the continent. From his point of view, the Hapsburg monarchy and his empire constituted a shame for the German world, being unable to control its own space of influence. He considered it absolutely necessary to involve Germany in supporting this project in order to form a super-state bordered in the Western part by France (the border between the two being fixed on the Rhine line), and in the Eastern part by Russia with which it would be adjacent along a demarcation line that would have left Karelia in the North and continued south to the "right or left" of Romania (Romania's situation being unclear, it could be negotiated depending on the military capacity of the Russian Empire).

In the initial version of the plan for the constitution of Central Europe, Bulgaria was located outside the boundaries of this area, but after entering the war together with Central Powers the author reconsidered the geopolitical limits of the region and included the Balkan state.

The national rebirth of the Slavs determined Naumann to look for a solution to the Polish problem. He considered that the future of this state was still closely linked to the Habsburg monarchy and proposed the unification of all territories inhabited by Poles (referring only to the area within the Tsarist empire) within the Danube monarchy. In his vision, Poland should also incorporate the territories inhabited by the Ukrainians and Belarusians and become the third subject of this federation.

The end of the First World War brought with it the dissolution of the dualist monarchy and consequently of the central European economic market too²⁷. The states in this area immediately felt the effects of this dismantling. None of them

benefited of a sufficient number of consumers to enable them to develop competitive industrial branches capable of competing with those in western Europe. The governments of the Central European states became very quickly aware of the fact that they could not support the development of strong national industries even if they were to increase the taxes for the imported products.

This shortcoming prompted them to look for new solutions to revitalize the common economic space. The major disadvantage was the desire of each state to play a major role in this project. Inter-war Austria had entered economically into the area of influence of Germany, thus creating a power vacuum which was quickly attempted to be occupied by a number of the former states of the empire. In the absence of the traditional hegemon, Hungary, as the governing partner, was the first to propose a project for the economic revival of Mitteleuropa.

After the rebirth of the Polish state, the political and economic decision-makers in this country also proposed a project similar to the Hungarian one, in which Poland was to play a very important role. They suggested the settlement of a "state" that would encompass all the territories included in the post-Baltic isthmus between Germany and Russia, including the Baltic states and even Ukraine. Just as the Hungarians, the Polish people were afraid to include in this space the strong German economy, which would have canceled from the beginning any effort to build competitive industrial sectors.

Marshal Josef Pilsudski, artisan of the policy of forming military alliances among the central European states, had conceived this project on the basis of the Polish-Lithuanian union that dominated this area during the Middle Ages²⁸. In contrast to the project conceived by Hungarians, based on rational economic principles, the Poles introduced in the elaborated plan the idea of forming a predominantly Catholic space (even if they wanted to include states with the majority of population being of Orthodox religion such as Romania and Ukraine) that would have formed a "sanitary cord" between liberal Europe and "Byzantine Europe" (Orthodox).

The breaking of the Central Powers bloc and the emergence of a mosaic of national states with large national minorities in the Central European area was strongly contested by many Western people of cultural.

Jean Berenger, history professor at the University of Strasbourg, mentioned in his book *The History of the Habsburg Empire*²⁹ that the decision to dissolve Austria-Hungary was a huge mistake.

At the end of the First World War, frightened by the possibility of rapidly recovering German influence in this area, France and the United Kingdom through the Versailles Peace Treaty decided to support the formation of a number of national states on the ruins of the former empire. The lack of political experience combined with the economic fragility and the inability of these new entities to support effective military groups capable of resisting the new type of threat (communist ideology promoted by the Soviet Union) have accentuated the crisis of collective security.

Conclusions

At present, there are many voices, especially coming from Hungarian and Austrian politicians who invoke the need for the economic restoration of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire economic space. To prove the chances of success of such a project the most appropriate solution would be to review the main problems faced by this political entity.

The historic facts clearly demonstrate the failure of this project. Despite some beautiful memories kept by the intellectual elites of the states from the former empire, the inter-community relations were very tense and the dualist state was unable to identify a solution that was suitable for all ethnic communities.

The artisans of this project should take into account the mistakes of the past and eliminate as much as possible the discrimination between the citizens of this continental bloc and give up the idea of dividing them once again into first and second rank citizens.

NOTES:

1 <https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/de-ce-este-numit-marele-razboi>

2 Einfeld Rainer, *Mitteleuropa in historical and contemporary perspective*, German Politics & Society, No. 28, 1993, p. 39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23735073?read-now=1&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents, accessed at 13.02.2020.

3 Friedrich Nauman, *Central Europe (Mittel-Europa)*, Knopf Alfred Publishing House, New York, 1917, p. 1, <https://>



ia902205.us.archive.org/1/items/centraleurope00naumgoog/centraleurope00naumgoog.pdf, accessed at 13.09.2017.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 34.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 25.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 103.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 14.

8 Richard Lodge, *Russia, Prussia, and Great Britain, 1742-1744*, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 45, no. 180, 1930, pp. 579-611, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/553394, accessed at 18.02.2020.

9 Piotr Wandycz, *The lands of partitioned 1795-1918*, University of Washington Press, Washington, 1975, p. 8.

10 Stacie Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: How Prussia Overturned the European Balance of Power*, *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Winter, 2008/2009), p. 129, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40207143?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Af497995a71081124b062d4deb440aba0&seq=20#page_scan_tab_contents, accessed at 14.02.2020.

11 Alice Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848-1914*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2000, p. 64, <https://books.google.ro/books>

12 Silviu Dragomir, *Avram Iancu*, Second Edition, Science Publishing House, Bucharest, 1968, p. 295.

13 John Komlos, *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Customs Union: Economic Development in Austria-Hungary in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable>, accessed at 26.02.2020.

14 Paul Kennedy, *Ascensiunea și decăderea marilor puteri. Transformări economice și conflicte militare din 1500 până în 2000*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2011, p. 180.

15 On 3 July 1866 Prussia defeated Austria, thus ending the existence of the Holy Roman Empire of German ancestry, whose crown traditionally returned to the Habsburgs emperors. This event created the premises of the emergence of a new empire inside the Germanic space from which Austria was definitively eliminated.

16 On 1-2 September 1870, the French Empire ruled by Napoleon III was abolished and the Republican France that followed him lost the right to intervene in Europe's problems.

17 Alfred D. Low, *The Anschluss Movement, 1918-1919, and the Paris Peace Conference*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1974, p. 416, <https://books.google.ro/books?>, accessed at 18.02.2020.

18 Victor Jaeschke, *A National "Struggle for Survival"? – The Badeni Crisis of 1897 in Cisleithania's German-language Press*, *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, No. 49/2017, p. 3 <https://ispan.waw.pl/journals/index.php/sn/article/view/sn.1436>, accessed 26.02.2020.

19 Jan Petras Rene Kuklik, *Minorities and Law In Czechoslovakia 1918-1992*, Estates Press Prague, 2017, p. 129.

20 John Schindler, *Fall of the double eagle. The battle for Galicia and the demise of Austro-Hungary*, Potomac Books, 2015, p. 251.

21 David S. Luft, *Hugo Von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea: Selected Essays and Addresses, 1906-1927*, Purdue University Press, 2011, pp. 103-106. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wq1n5.15, accessed at 26.02.2020.

22 Aurel Popovici, *Stat și națiune. Statele Unite ale Austriei Mari*, Albatros Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997. Following the fact that the European Union encourages the development of regional identities (underlining the advantages of smaller-scale economic development planning), as an alternative to the centralized development of national economies, the model suggested by Aurel C. Popovici may be considered topical once again. The need to promote this idea of coexistence and inter-ethnic cooperation within a wider (central European) economic market determined the decision-makers in Austria to support the publication of this book in 2014. This cultural movement joins the economic measures (the acquisition by Austrian companies and banks of many of the assets of the former state-owned companies in central European countries) thus contributing to a geopolitical repositioning of the "former central European empire" in its former area of influence. This type of measures is clear in the new German geopolitics of Central Europe, which through the recreating of regional identities gains a consistent advance in front of national thinking (directing all internal resources towards a judicious planning of the national economy).

23 *Ibidem*, p. 266.

24 https://austria-forum.org/attach/AEI/OU/Popovici%2C_Aurel/OE_U%20.png, accessed at 07.03.2018.

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28 Manuel Stănescu, *Romania and Poland in the inter-war period: "Alliance of hearts, one people with two flags"*, *Revista Historia*, <https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/romania-si-polonia-in-perioada-interbelicalianta-inimilor-un-singur-popor-cu-doua-drapele>, accessed at 04.02.2019.

29 Jean Berenger, *History of the Habsburg empire 1273-1918*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 127.

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