

# Towards a New Notion of Central Europe

## *Deliberations on European Colonial Experience and Diverging Geopolitical Outlooks*

Pavlo Klimkin and Andreas Umland  
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On 23 June 2022, the [European Council](#) recognized “the European perspective of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia”. The heads of state and government of the 27 EU member states announced that: “The future of these countries and their citizens lies within the European Union”. With Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia’s official transition from associate partners to future EU member states, an old question has resurfaced: What and where are the borders of and in Europe?

The dispute about the nature, variety and limits of European civilization is age old and unresolved. The escalation of the Russia-Ukraine War since 24 February 2022 has moved the question of what “Europe” means to the forefront once again. At the same time, intra-European debates in recent months – if not years – have once more demonstrated significant differences in various Europeans’ views of the world.

The connotations and definitions of terms such as Western, Central and Eastern Europe have been discussed in different ways by various commentators, to be sure, for several centuries. However, these debates have been largely philosophical. While such discussions continue to be conducted to this day, they have had few concrete political repercussions.

By contrast, today’s dividing lines within Europe concern a number of urgent international policy issues: at what speed should the EU and NATO enlarge? How far and how fast should Western military support for Ukraine go? Which security structure is best for the European continent? What role should the US, Canada and the United Kingdom play in the

future of continental Europe? The answers to these questions are neither clear-cut nor fully overlapping. Yet, on these and similar issues, there is an obvious recurring geographical divide within the community of EU member states and candidate countries.

Against this background, the distinctly post-colonial notion of Central Europe that we propose below could be seen as having not only philosophical, but also practical dimensions. Central Europe could be understood to specifically encompass those European nations that: (a) emerged out of the former German, Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian empires (as well, perhaps, Yugoslavia); and (b) were not imperial hegemons. Europe's formerly colonized peoples' involuntary past in large multinational authoritarian or even totalitarian states could today be seen as the basis for a specifically Central European identity.

Not only geographically, but also philosophically, Central Europe is neither Western nor Eastern Europe. The intra-European colonial experiences of numerous European nations have resulted in a common comprehension of Europe's geopolitics for these post-colonial Europeans. This historically conditioned, largely similar, outlook on how international politics works and the common Central European experience could and should play a role in their deeper cooperation in the future.

## **From Middle to Central Europe**

The classical cultural-religious meaning of Middle Europe (from the German *Mitteleuropa*) is different. This older concept has typically focused on the Protestant and Catholic territories located to the East of the Roman and to the West of the Orthodox worlds of continental Europe. Since the end of World War II, the stretch of Europe as a political realm has gradually extended ever further to the east. Landmarks were the accessions of Turkey (1950), Russia (1996) and Azerbaijan (2001) to the Council of Europe – the oldest existing intergovernmental organization, founded in 1949. As a result, the meaning of the word “European” has changed. The inclusion, moreover, of the five Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tadjikistan – first, as Soviet republics (1973), in the Conference on, and then, as independent states (1995), in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe further expanded the notion of Europe.

Another consequential step furthering the relocation of Europe's midpoint was the EU's conclusion and ratification of, and moves to implement in 2014–2016, three especially far-reaching Association Agreements with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. While initially containing no clear membership pathways, these treaties again redefined the centre of Europe. These legally and politically novel pacts are of a qualitatively different type to the similarly labelled agreements that Brussels has signed with various countries around the world, from Chile to South Africa. In contrast, the EU's 2014 Moldovan, Ukrainian and Georgian contracts *de facto* constitute European integration treaties.

Brussels' new agreements with Chisinau, Kyiv and Tbilisi are forcing the three states to incorporate most of the EU's laws and regulations, the so-called *acquis communautaire*, into their domestic legislation. The agreements have thus from the beginning be integrating the three countries into the EU's economic, legal and trade areas. The three mammoth contracts are thereby gradually placing Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia on an equal economic footing with the EU's member states. Even before 2022, they were implicitly preparing the three hitherto “Eastern European” nations for future political accession to the EU.

Sooner or later, each of the three countries was therefore bound to receive an official accession invitation from Brussels. Now, it looks as if Ukraine and Moldova will begin membership negotiations with the EU soon. Eventually, all three members of the Association Trio will join as full members. Until recently, the geopolitical dimension of the three understatedly entitled Association Agreements had been partly lost in many European capitals. A notable exception was Moscow, which understood the long-term consequences of Kyiv's new treaty with Brussels – as the Kremlin's actions since 2013 have continually illustrated.

## The Notion of Central Europe Today

These and other momentous recent developments in European affairs should, among other things, lead to a redefinition of the meaning of Europe, and in particular of the meaning of Central Europe. Various designations as “European” have been constantly moving eastwards for the past 50 years – and are continuing to do so. In the light of this passage and against the background of modern continental European history, the term Central Europe could now be geographically reassigned and semantically reformulated. The predominance of Orthodox Christianity in Romania and Bulgaria, which acceded to the EU in 2007, as well as in the now EU-associated republics of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, undercuts Mitteleuropa's older delineation with reference to the border between Western and Eastern Christianity.

Instead, today the concept of Central Europe can, in the light of recent European “easternization”, be used to refer to the specifically colonial and shared historical experience of the peoples once ruled from Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul, and Moscow (as well as, perhaps, Belgrade). What makes the various peoples between Prague and Tbilisi similar to each other is that they were once all more or less suppressed nations within the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Tsarist or Soviet empires. It is true that the individual nations in question and the hegemonic powers that ruled them were widely different, and each has developed in different ways over time. Nonetheless, the nationalities of Central Europe all experienced some form of prolonged imperial rule.

Moreover, many of these different peoples lived side by side in the multinational towns and cities of their once large land empires. There were, of course, animosities, strife and even pogroms. Nonetheless, in Riga, Krakow or Odessa, Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews and representatives of other faiths and ethnicities once shared largely common fates. Sometimes, they studied at multi-ethnic schools and universities.

There were certainly significant differences in each empire's policies towards minorities and in the individual experiences that the nationalities had vis-à-vis their Western or Eastern hegemonic nations. Nonetheless, the specifically common Central European experience of having once been colonies is an important aspect of the historical formation of all these nations. Arguably, traces of these commonalities in their past experiences can still be detected in the views and behaviour of Central European states today, which are different from the imperial nations of Western and Eastern Europe.

## Utilizing Central Europe's Common Identity

As is known all too well, this commonly experienced history ended abruptly after the First World War. As their host empires broke apart, several of the formerly suppressed peoples

turned against each other. Once largely peaceful neighbours transformed into national competitors or even enemies and mass murderers. Some committed horrible crimes against their former compatriots, and especially against Central Europe's Jewish minority. Memories of the nationalistic battles and crimes of the inter-war and World War II periods still reverberate today.

Nonetheless, these dark pages in their common history should not invalidate the various commonalities that brought Central Europeans closer together in the past, and still lead many of them to feel a specific kind of community today. The similar historical experiences of the once colonial peoples of Europe could even become a basis for political projects. Moreover, such initiatives could and should also be discussed with the post-colonial peoples of the southern Caucasus. One day, they may even be of interest to the nations of Central Asia.



### **Pavlo Klimkin**

Pavlo Klimkin was Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2014–2019.



### **Andreas Umland**

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

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