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Being European (free, modern and independent): as seen from Central and Eastern Europe

The philosophy and culture of *the Enlightenment* shaped the mental map of Europe, drawing a distinction between civilization and barbarism. The latter is now rising again, and contemporary geopolitics, turned upside down by the Russian war and the scale of aggression in the Middle East, is bringing the clash of civilizations back into focus. The war against the West, the anti-Western narrative, the confrontation between the free world and authoritarian regimes nostalgic for distant empires, the desire to create grey zones, barriers to the spread of values that are uncomfortable, even threatening, for hostile centralized systems, are challenging Europe. Authoritarianism, the aspiration to infinite power, corruption rooted in state governance, the use of repression against all opposition, the manipulation of international law and interference go hand in hand with militaristic slogans that promote the erasure of certain states from the world map, and illustrate the mutation of systems towards new forms of power. Clinging to undivided power, the designation of a common enemy fosters the attraction of war and murder.

So, what is this *West* that some say they are fighting or want to do away with? What choices have those who fervently resist this threat made? What does it mean to *be European*, which has become a "*raison d'être*" in countries threatened by the Kremlin? Now is the time to take a closer look at the contribution of these states resisting the threat to our perception of what it means to *be European*. What does it mean to be European in Central and Eastern Europe[1], which has remained European despite the Iron Curtain? Far from seeking an exhaustive answer to this complex question, our aim is to examine some of the notions that permeate the European idea in Central and Eastern Europe.

[1] See *Histoire de l'Europe du centre-est*, dir. Jerzy Kloczowski, éd. PUF, Paris 2004, pp 17-19.

[2] See P. Wandycz, « *La guerre et la paix* », in : *Histoire de l'Europe du centre-est*, op.cit., pp.887-888

[3] See J.M. Robert, O.A. Westad, *Histoire du monde*, vol. 3 *L'Age des révolutions*, tr. Antoine Bourguilleau, éd. Perrin, Paris 2004.

[4] See Vaclav Havel, *A vrai dire. Livre de l'après-pouvoir*, tr. Jan Rubes, éditions de l'Aube, Paris 2006, p. 14

RETURN TO THE EUROPEAN FOLD

The Soviet Union crumbled at the end of the Cold War, bringing with it the collapse of the Eastern bloc. If for Putin and those nostalgic for the USSR this was "[the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century](#)", the same is certainly not true for Central and Eastern Europe.

Traditionally and historically oriented towards Western civilisation, the region experienced major political, economic and societal upheaval: "*Caught up in the Soviet system, they played the role of a quasi-colony, garrison country and strategic glacis for the USSR. Cut off, particularly during the Stalinist era, from the modernisation processes begun in the West, they had to bear the burden of Soviet-style industrialisation and pay the costs of their membership of the Warsaw Pact and COMECON. Their budgets were particularly burdened by an extremely heavy and complex armaments system, but also by the aid they had to provide to non-European Communist countries. This widened the civilisational gap between Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of Western Europe.*"[2]

The fall of the USSR turned this enforced, and then well-established, system on its head [3]. Many dissidents joined the political scene[4]. Some states, such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, broke up completely. The young elites embarked on economic reforms, which were not widely understood in all regions. Political debates were launched, and diplomacy was developed to explain to the whole world who these new countries were that had emerged from the Soviet bloc and were assimilated to Russian culture or Communism.

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25 years ago, in 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined NATO. Five years later, in 2004, Romania, Bulgaria[5] , Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined them in the Atlantic Alliance. In 2004, [ten countries joined the European Union](#), including eight from the former "*communist bloc*" - Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. This membership went hand in hand with their integration into NATO. Having emerged from the Soviet domination to become independent states, their choice was clear and determined: the European Union offered prosperity and a return to historical and cultural Europe, while NATO guaranteed security, primarily with regard to Russia.

While in the first years after accession, these States delegated geostrategic decisions and orientations to a certain extent to the European and transatlantic bodies, from 2014 onwards, with the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the attitude of their representatives has now changed. Geopolitics saw its axis shift to the east of Europe, to the extent that these states have been pushed to the front line. After a period of alerting the European community to the growing danger, they have now become players in European policy, driven by the objective of European resilience, based on unity, solidarity and common defence. This European discourse, which holds that belonging to Europe means modernity and the guarantee of political independence[6], is not new; it was born with the first independence states after the First World War. Unfortunately, this was stifled by the Second World War and the successive pacts signed with the USSR.

2004 therefore marked a return to the European fold[7] . The enthusiasm of the populations of these countries in joining the Union was defined by a feeling of belonging to a common historical destiny, their attachment to freedom and, above all, by the belief that they were at last "*returning*" to the European family, from which they had been separated [by the Yalta agreements](#). For the generation that suffered under Communist oppression, the experience was a defining one, and the event took on existential significance.

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: A SHARED DESTINY

The expression "community of destiny" is understood to be synonymous with the European Union. It is used to describe an area of shared values, a way of life, free thought, the protection of fundamental rights and a religious and cultural heritage. Within the European family, a certain and sometimes more accentuated distinction between East and West persists. The Russian war against Ukraine has revived the concept of the centre of Europe, and this centrality goes beyond a purely geographical definition. It carries a deeper connotation and, in the face of a threatening Russia, an existential meaning. In her book "*Cette Europe qu'on dit centrale*", Catherine Horel writes: "*Central Europe exists, it is a historical notion, a community of destinies and cultures, a civilisation inherited from the Habsburg Empire that define references, a mental geography, architecture, gastronomy and a different relationship to the world. But these common features belong largely to the realm of memories and are therefore subject to attitudes: oblivion, on the one hand, nostalgia, on the other. Following the transition to democracy and integration into the European Union, Central Europe is now losing some of the political and geopolitical significance that justified its rediscovery in the 1980s*"[8] .

For too long, the anguish of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has been explained solely in terms of the traumas still fresh from the USSR. The participation of Baltic and Polish leaders alongside the Ukrainian opposition during the Maïdan demonstrations of 2004 and 2014, does not seem to have elicited any response from decision-makers in the older members of the European Union. Calls for European solidarity failed to gain any traction. This can be explained by the fact that while proximity to these new member states was accepted, Ukraine was still regarded as *Russian* by Western chancelleries, for geopolitical convenience and to appease the Kremlin.

[5] Bulgaria and Romania become members of the European Union in 2007.

[6] At the end of the 19th century, for example, the Ukrainian elite was engaged in an intellectual dialogue about the best way to move towards a European and independent Ukraine. Some, like Mychajlo Dragomanov, argued that Ukraine needed to ally itself with Russian liberal intellectual circles if it was to build its independence and regain its link with Europe. Others, like Ivan Franko, insisted that the link with Russia and the independence of European Ukraine were incompatible.

[7] Bronisław Geremek, *Nasza Europa*, [Notre Europe], Cracovie, Universitas, 2012 ; Roman Kuźniar, *My, Europa*, Scholar, Varsovie, 2013 ; Enrico Letta, *Faire l'Europe dans un monde de brutes*, Fayard, Paris, 2017.

[8] See Catherine Horel, *Cette Europe qu'on dit centrale - des Habsbourg à l'intégration européenne 1815-2004*, Beauchesne, Paris, 2009.

This caution proved to be futile. 24 February 2022 revealed an eastern frontier of Europe, one that the West has ignored for too long: the territories and peoples who are genuinely under threat of aggression from Russia and who have chosen a European future that includes non-alignment with a huge neighbour eager for imperial restoration. The days and weeks following the invasion illustrate this determination, but they also highlight a common destiny that inspires these European peoples, who in reality cover half of Europe. In the midst of this historic conflict on the European continent, the contiguous links in this common space are once again being expressed. National and political singularities are no obstacle to this urge to speak with one voice, especially given their shared history.

POLITICAL AND MILITARY UNIONS

In historiographic discourse, the 16th century opened a modern page in the history of the region. Indeed, [the Union of Lublin of 1569](#) was central to the historical make-up of the region as the date on which a federal state was formed, embracing a territory stretching as far as the Dnieper. This is the territory that is currently Belarusian and Ukrainian. Moreover, the constituent act of the Union of Lublin was signed for the most part by the nobility from the eastern lands and included the so-called [Cossack Republic](#). The Union of Lublin thus incorporated territories as far as Kyiv and established a harmonised political and legal system.

This is a reminder of one of those historical facts, often ignored, which lies at the origins of the social formation of the region, right up to the Ukrainian territories. It forms a fundamental basis for understanding contemporary Ukrainian society. As far back as the 14th and 15th centuries, [Magdeburg Rights, in other words city law, an urban privilege of Bavarian origin](#), was adopted in Ukrainian cities. The expansion of European culture in Ukraine went hand in hand with the development of this law and the university network in these territories. This law is at the origin of the civil and urban formations in this region of Europe. Since the 14th century, Magdeburg law was adopted in Sianik (1339), Lviv (1356), Kamnits-Podilsky (1374), Lutsk (1432) and Kyiv (1497), to name but a few. This

city law was at the origin of the Ukrainian national formation, as distinct from the Russian cities, which are subject to a different legal reality. The phenomenon of large-scale meetings on Maïdan is closely linked to the culture of citizens expressing their will and protesting against political or administrative decisions. For several centuries, in Ukraine, this spirit of communes, towns and villages and decision-making at local level, accompanied by clear decentralisation, has been part of the formation of a unique identity.

This shared past with a similar legal and social system, the university network^[9], the military system and the nobility established over this vast territory are at the root of the modern history of these European peoples. Particularly during the rule of the Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, this shared past, with its many myths and legends, resurfaced in national narratives in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A sense of belonging to Europe was forged among these peoples.^[10]

Since the 16th century, in these multinational and multi-confessional territories, there has been a mixed relationship with the Russian empire and culture. The rejection of the Russian world is indicative of this feeling of belonging to the western part of Europe^[11]. Even in Ukraine, where the Russian-speaking population remains large, the distinction with Russian culture remains profound and is not limited to intellectual or academic thought. ^[12]

Milan Kundera describes this part of Europe as "the culture of destiny". Admittedly, this destiny has been forged over the centuries through links and unions, but also through conflict. These Central and Eastern European territories have been subjected to multiple aggressions from empires, without losing their uniqueness. Despite the region's territorial importance and glorious, heroic past, it has no hegemonic aspirations, which also brings its state components closer together. Finally, linguistic similarities and a shared or related folk culture between the populations form a common core. This was the subject of numerous studies at the time of the resistance to communism and is still the subject of much debate today.

[9] See Nathalie de Kaniv, « L'Université européenne : universitas et l'esprit européen, in : Souveraineté et solidarité, un défi européen, dir. Nathalie de Kaniv et Patrick Bellouard, éd. du CERF, Paris 2021 ; Nathalie de Kaniv, « Université », in : La Vie de l'esprit en Europe centrale et orientale depuis 1945, dictionnaire encyclopédique, dir. Chantal Delsol et Joanna Nowicki, éd. du Cerf, 2021.

[10] See Miloš Zelenka, L'Europe centrale dans le contexte de la géographie littéraire et symbolique, 2012

[11] See František Palacký or Sandor Marai.

[12] See the work of Leonid Kuchma (former president of the Republic of Ukraine), L'Ukraine ce n'est pas la Russie Kyiv 2003.

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**TO DIE FOR EUROPE IN 1956 AND 1968 AND
THE EUROPEAN SPRING**

To die for Europe... This wilful slogan may seem abstract, unrealistic, even utopian. Yet historically, it has been a reality, and it is in Central and Eastern Europe that these words have taken on a life of their own. Belonging to Europe is a guarantee of independence, prosperity and modernity.

In *"The Kidnapped West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe"*, published in the French magazine *Le Débat* in 1983, Milan Kundera looks back at the 1956 and 1968 movements in favour of freedom: *"We are dying for Hungary and for Europe"*, such was the state of mind that animated the Central and Eastern European elites under Soviet domination.

Central Europe seemed to disappear in 1945 with the Yalta agreements, which anchored it on the eastern side and integrated it into the Soviet bloc. For more than thirty years, it resisted and defended its distinction, suffered purges and the extermination of its elites, found itself betrayed, divided, helpless and dominated by an authoritarian external power. Within this "bloc of socialist countries", organised under the hostile and repressive Soviet protectorate, a culture of resistance quickly formed and became, over the decades and across the countries, absolutely crucial to preserving fundamental values and standing up to repression. This resistance brought together the intellectual and cultural elite. Focused on the future and young people, its unwavering action remained peaceful despite the many members of the Resistance being imprisoned, tortured and sent to the camps, where most were condemned to die. When the spring of 1968 set Europe ablaze, the border between East and West seemed to disappear. In Prague and Warsaw, a movement for liberation and emancipation, for a European choice, took hold of people's minds. It was called [the Prague Spring](#). In Paris, May '68 pushed back the frontiers of freedom and demanded a new beginning. In both parts of Europe, the movement carried the slogans of new freedom and youth played a crucial role, but they were distinct. As Milan Kundera put it: *"The Parisian May '68 challenged so-called European culture and its*

traditional values. The Prague Spring was a passionate defence of European cultural tradition in the broadest and most tolerant sense of the term (defence of both Christianity and modern art, both equally denied by the authorities). We all fought for our right to this tradition, threatened by the anti-Western messianism of Russian totalitarianism"[13].

Today, particularly among young people and the intellectual elite, Central Europe is imbued with this desire to protect European values and the fundamental principles that make up the European soul.

RESISTANCE BEHIND THE BERLIN WALL

Communist repression forced many non-conformist academics into exile and to find new places to work and resist. Here again, Western universities and non-governmental organisations played their part. There are many examples such as the French network for [Jerzy Giedroyc's review *Kultura*](#).

The Institute of Central and Eastern Europe was founded at Columbia University with the support of Oskar Halecki. The University of Colorado published *The Journal of Central European Affairs*, and several other initiatives were born and grew during the Cold War. Various American funds supported scientific research into the European area. Most American universities hosted Slavic Studies Institutes and stimulated academic exchanges, which intensified at the end of the Communist era.

In 1989, dialogue in the academic world of Central and Eastern Europe gave rise to a shared interest in revisiting the past of these nations, which had often formed a community or federation in the course of their history or belonged to the same empire. This led to initiatives such as the [Institute of Central and Eastern Europe in Lublin](#), founded in 1991 (NGO supported by UNESCO). Two years later, the International Federation of Central and Eastern European Institutes was born, comprising seven national institutes, and joined by Italian, French, German and American academic centres. Europe is central to the work of the [Polish Robert Schuman Foundation](#). One example is the research project

[13] Milan Kundera, *La Plaisanterie*, Prague, 1968.

initiated by the Institute of Central and Eastern Europe in Lublin, involving Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian historians working on the Polish-Lithuanian Union: The Congress of Historians, which meets in Krakow every year. For some years now, this forum for scientific dialogue has been dealing with the common identity and heritage of Central Europe.

The importance of the region's universities is a reminder of the close link with European history. From the Middle Ages onwards, the map of university foundations went hand in hand with the spread of European culture. Universities were the first places to be persecuted by totalitarian systems such as Nazism and Communism. They were also the centres of resistance and political intellectual training. After 1989, the university took up its rightful place within the country again. Research centres and think-tanks developed. The [success of the University of Tartu](#) is held up as an example with its start-ups, cradle of innovation and cyber-development (security, defence, technology), the pioneer country - Estonia - in digital administration recognised as a digital democracy at the service of citizens.

THE "SINGING RESISTANCE" EMERGES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Looking back over the history of the twentieth century, one fact gives a very special colour to the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe: the introduction of music as a means of political resistance. This underground musical and artistic phenomenon quickly became political. Over the years, music became a characteristic element, symbolising the peaceful will to resist. The Czech resistance movement called itself the "*Velvet Revolution*", inspired by the name of the New York group Velvet Underground, linked to Andy Warhol^[14]. In 1968, Václav Havel brought back an album from a trip to the United States: copied many times, it circulated in avant-garde circles and inspired cultural dissidence. In his memoirs, Lou Reed, the band's lead singer, recounts his many exchanges with Václav Havel, underlining the importance of rock music in the resistance and, later, in the fall of the regime^[15].

A month after the Prague Spring, young musicians in Prague, inspired by the Velvet Underground, got together under the name of [The Plastic People of the Universe](#) (PPU), with artistic director Ivan Martin Jirous. They did not seek confrontation with the system but were immediately perceived as a threat by it. In 1977, following the banning of one of their concerts in 1976, a group of intellectuals, including Václav Havel, signed the [Charter 77](#), which demanded respect for human rights and the application of fundamental freedoms. It was one of the triggers of the resistance in Czechoslovakia.

After the fall of Communism, part of the new democratic elite was drawn from this milieu. The underground transformed this Western, American or European inspiration, appropriating it to make music - and art more broadly - a political instrument of resistance, but also of belonging to the West and its values (freedom, fundamental rights, diversity, openness to others, freedom of expression).

In Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, the period 1987-1991, which saw the restoration of their independence, is known as the Singing Revolution, a term coined by Heinz Valk at the Tallinn Song Festival to designate "*the night of mass singing*" (10-11 June 1988). Sandra Kalniete describes the Singing Revolution in a book that is her personal diary: "*Singing Freedom: The Latvian Revolution and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*"^[16]. In 1987, a music festival in Tallinn brought together over three hundred thousand Estonians to sing banned songs and anthems. The Latvian singing revolution became the symbol of a committed choice of European identity. It ruled out violence but demanded respect for the inalienable right of a people to decide its own future.

The emphasis on peace and freedom was an expression of attachment to the fundamental rights that are part of Europe's genetic code. The defence of these civilisational values is reflected in the unwavering commitment of these three countries, particularly in European military operations. On 23 August 1989, two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians formed a 600km human chain to condemn the Soviet past and

[14] Andy Warhol, or Andrew Warhola, was born of Ruthenian parents from the village of Mikov in north-east Slovakia.

[15] Vclav Havel, *A vrai dire*, op.cit., pp. 15-17.

[16] Sandra Kalniete, *Chantons la Libert : la Rvolution lettone et la chute de l'empire sovitique*, trad. Ansis Reinhards, d. Lasitava, 2019.

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express hope for the future. Called the [Baltic Way](#), this event symbolised the profound choice made by the three countries, as expressed in the verses written for the occasion "The Baltic countries are waking up".

THE PRO-EUROPEAN REVOLUTION IN KYIV IN 2004

When the countries of Central and Eastern Europe became members of NATO and the European Union in May 2004, there was perceptible discomfort in Ukraine. It was a sign of frustration that a new curtain was being drawn, this time between Ukraine and the Eastern Europe to which it is so close. At the same time, Ukraine feels more European. Young Ukrainians do not face the same fears as the old opponents. They did not live through the Communist era and are growing up in an independent Ukraine; they have no nostalgia for the Soviet past. Russian-speaking or Ukrainian-speaking, it does not matter, the choice of young Ukrainians escapes rancour and artificial interpretations of a country divided between East and West. Between May and December of that year, the expression of this modern, peaceful European feeling, thirsting for freedom, was forged. At the time, Volodymyr Zelensky was 28 years old and [Oleksandra Matviichuk](#) 21.

Vaclav Havel captured these sentiments well: "*The particularity of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine lies not only in the fact that it took place in a large and important country of the former Soviet empire, and is therefore an inspiration for other countries still suffering from post-communism, but also in the fact that this revolution probably provided an answer to the question, which is still open, of where the limits of the great network of our (Western) civilisation lie and where the other network (Eastern, in other words the Eurasian space) begins.*[17]"

It was on Independence Square, known as Maidan, in Kyiv in December 2004, that opposition to the political regime in office and massive corruption was organised and transformed into the Ukrainian Orange Revolution. Guided by a firm but peaceful desire to protest, this opposition brought together many intellectuals, artists and musicians. Young people fully supported the movement, giving it an unprecedented opening.

Tradition meets modernity, expressing a sense of belonging to European culture. Two famous rock bands [Vopli Vidoplasova \(VV\)](#) and [Okean Elzy](#) and the Eurovision award-winning singer [Ruslana](#) actively supported the events. This commitment gave rise to a series of national and political actions. The leader of the VV group, Oleg Skrypka, created a National Festival of Ukrainian Culture, which has become an annual event bringing together young people from all over the country around Ukrainian arts and traditions. The singer Ruslana joined Victor Yushchenko's political party and was elected Member of Parliament. As for Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, leader of the Okean Elzy rock group, the most popular in Ukraine, after serving as a member of parliament between 2007 and 2008, he founded a pro-European party, *Golos*. The artists of this young Ukrainian generation, active in the opposition to the post-communist government, forcefully and convincingly declared their attachment to the country's European choice.

Ten years later, still on Maidan, bloody history returned. The most recent Ukrainian revolution was seen as a choice of civilisation by the younger generation (students, intellectual and cultural elite) opposed to the dictatorship of Victor Yanukovich. Under the surveillance of special forces and snipers, the demonstrators chanted pro-European slogans; the opposition of the president to a [rapprochement with the European Union](#) triggered protests.

In February 2014, one hundred young people were shot on the Maidan and were compared with the one thousand one hundred and eleven intellectuals and artists shot by the KGB in the space of a few days, in 1937. On the Maidan, the slogan "we are dying for Europe" once again became the opposition's leitmotif. While it may seem utopian or idealistic today in Western Europe, it was openly shown and defended in 2014. The hundred or so demonstrators who died there have become the symbol of the country's independence and deep-rooted belonging to Europe. "We die for Europe" has become a marker of civilisation. Despite the pain of the losses and the atrocities caused by the regime that clung to power, this sense of belonging to Europe was accompanied by peaceful expression, in which music played an important role. So, it is hardly surprising that in 2022, in the first few months of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, burgeoning musical creation on the part of artists, soldiers, volunteers, doctors and politicians embraced peace in wartime.

[17] See V. Havel, *op.cit.*
p. 34.

FREEDOM: THE ROLE OF NGOS IN POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The last example illustrating the community of destiny is a phenomenon that has been observed in recent years. The work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) developed secretly^[18] within the Eastern bloc, then rapidly developed thanks to a positive social climate.

At present there are more than [40,000 NGOs in Ukraine](#). These figures give a brief overview of the mobilisation of organised civil society on the ground^[19]. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has changed the landscape, especially in Eastern Europe.

First as Prime Minister (1999-2001), then as President of Ukraine (2005-2010), Victor Yushchenko supported the development of various NGOs in his country, which received both Western and Ukrainian funding. Since then, their presence has continued to grow and to gain the trust of the population, who see the benefits they bring. The interaction between the population and the institutes of organised civil society is evolving rapidly and is fostering a pro-European climate in Ukraine, particularly among young people and academics. This is evidenced by the fact that the Maidan revolution began with the firm protest of Ukrainian students in November 2013.

Moreover, any desire to return to a Russian protectorate was strongly opposed by civil society, both in 2004 and in 2014. Naturally, the pro-Russian government condemned this pro-European climate and the Maidan revolutions by accusing direct American funding or the intrusion of CIA agents or other intelligence services among the demonstrators. A witch-hunt and the assertion of a "*conspiratorial*" mindset against Russia or the pro-Russian elites has pervaded political discourse in Russia and Belarus. However, the activities of independent institutes and NGOs promoting exchanges between Ukraine, the Baltic States, Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe have enabled the formation of a common European identity with a similar history and culture, underpinned by fundamental shared values. In this respect, NGOs are effective players in a diplomatic action that federates peoples and dialogues. Furthermore, this movement continues to this day in Belarus. It is slower, but it made its voice heard during the rigged elections in 2020. It continues to undermine the fate of the self-proclaimed President Lukashenko. His

Russian counterpart is facing the same issue. The actions of the two leaders are similar: before ordering fire, they carry out a meticulous campaign of destruction against NGOs, the media and intellectuals.

All in all, NGOs and civil society are benefiting from the rich soil formed by centuries of development of urban law, the creation of universities, cultural exchanges and a shared past with multiple interactions on the terrain of Central and Eastern Europe.

EUROPE'S LARGEST-EVER ENLARGEMENT

Since the Second World War, the European Community and NATO have formed a bloc of prosperity and security. The legacy of the world wars is still significant: both conflicts were started in Europe by Europeans and both were won thanks to the American ally. So, Europe still relies on the US. As the states of Western Europe rebuilt themselves in the face of the Soviet threat, European security was entrusted to the United States, under the guise of an alliance. The wars in the former Yugoslavia confirmed this pattern in the twentieth century. Central Europe's favourable attitude towards America may come as a surprise, but it is rooted in history. Firstly, NATO was created as a defence against the USSR, something that Central Europe had long been waiting for: it still fears geographical proximity to a threatening neighbour^[20]. The successive stages of NATO and EU enlargement placed the European defence project on the back burner. The United States has taken advantage of this favourable framework to intensify its ties in the region, support the development of these countries in several areas and establish bilateral relations with them. NATO's importance for Central and Eastern Europe is linked to the welcome American presence in the region. The security guarantees provided by NATO, but also by the United States, remain a priority, but the Russian war against Ukraine is forcing Central and Eastern European countries to rethink their defence strategy. Although attached to the transatlantic alliance, their initiatives towards European defence are multiplying and they are becoming real players and driving forces in this field. [The name of Kaja Kallas is now being put forward](#), in view of the formation of the next European Commission, as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union.

^[18] Remember the Helsinki Group, the dissident movement, the 1960s movement - like the Prague Spring, etc. See *La Vie de l'esprit en Europe centrale et orientale depuis 1945*, encyclopaedic dictionary, edited by Chantal Delsol and Joanna Nowicki, éd. du Cerf, 2021.

^[19] Nathalie de Kaniv, « Universités et ONG, un terrain propice pour l'expression de la société civile en Europe de l'Est », *Hermès, La Revue*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2022, pp. 76-80.

^[20] See A.W. Deporte, *Europe between the Super Power. The Enduring Balance*, New Haven, 1986; *Political and Ideological Confrontations in Twenty-Century Europe*, New York, 1996.

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The singularities of each European history and culture form a rich corpus that deserves to be better known, to understand the *Other* but also to strengthen our community of destiny.

Deprived of political freedom, Central and Eastern European societies learned to widen their scope of action and to continue to be European. This is neither a new concept, nor a new sense of belonging. On the contrary, belonging to Europe has evolved in the midst of a hostile and oppressive system. This may explain why Central and Eastern Europe has some

innovative players. The Ukrainian resistance, but also the inventiveness of the whole of society, despite being at war, the unshakeable choice of freedom and a philosophy of life - all these elements have contributed to a certain European awakening and a revision of our vision of Central and Eastern Europe.

The question of enlargement is on the table again. In the Balkans, Moldavia, Georgia and Ukraine, being European has taken on new meaning. It is a challenge for the construction of Europe and for intra-European dialogue, which has reached a tipping point: it is no longer just a question of "historical justice", but of European strategy and sovereignty.

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