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Regional integration of Central and Eastern Europe according to Milan Hodža in 21st century

Integracja regionalna Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej według Milana Hodży w XXI wieku

Abstract
The paper examines the prospects for closer integration and deeper cooperation among Central and Eastern European states, particularly Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Austria. It considers the possibility of a regional cooperation framework operating with limited dependence on Western Europe or major powers such as the US, Russia and Germany. A regional bloc of this kind could function as a balancer in international relations and strengthen European security, potentially enabling new security structures based on a Central European peacekeeping force. The analysis draws on Milan Hodža's concept of a Danube Federation and his broader vision of a regional federation stretching from Gdańsk to Thessaloniki. The article reconstructs Hodža's ideas, situates them in the interwar period and evaluates their relevance for the 21st century amid EU crises and renewed geopolitical tensions. The study uses qualitative analysis of Hodža's writings and comparative references to other regional integration projects.

Keywords: Central European Federation, Danube federation, Agrarian Democracy, Little Entente, Central European Peacekeeping Force, European security architecture

Abstrakt
Artykuł analizuje perspektywy bliższej integracji i pogłębionej współpracy państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej, zwłaszcza Polski, Węgier, Słowacji, Serbii, Rumunii, Bułgarii i Austrii. Rozważa możliwość stworzenia regionalnych ram współpracy funkcjonujących przy ograniczonej zależności od Europy Zachodniej oraz mocarstw, takich jak USA, Rosja i Niemcy. Taki blok mógłby pełnić rolę równoważącą w stosunkach międzynarodowych i wzmacniać bezpieczeństwo europejskie, prowadząc do nowych struktur bezpieczeństwa opartych na środkowoeuropejskich siłach pokojowych. Analiza odwołuje się do koncepcji Federacji Naddunajskiej Milana Hodży oraz jego szerszej wizji federacji od Gdańska po Saloniki. Artykuł rekonstruuje jego idee, umieszcza je w realiach okresu międzywojennego i ocenia ich znaczenie dla XXI wieku w warunkach kryzysów UE i napięć geopolitycznych. W badaniu wykorzystano jakościową analizę pism Hodży i porównania z innymi projektami integracyjnymi.

Słowa kluczowe: Federacja Środkowoeuropejska, Federacja Dunajska, demokracja agrarna, Mała Ententa, środkowoeuropejskie siły pokojowe, europejska architektura bezpieczeństwa

Introduction

Debates about the future of the European Union and the security architecture of the continent have intensified in recent years in the context of multiple crises – financial and economic turbulence, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing geopolitical rivalry among great powers and, above all, the war in Ukraine. In this context, ideas of regional cooperation and the search for alternative models of integration in Central and Eastern Europe are gaining renewed attention.

The political thought of Milan Hodža belongs to the still insufficiently explored intellectual heritage that can inspire these contemporary debates. Hodža's concept of a Central European Federation, developed in the interwar period and during his exile in the Second World War, combined geopolitical reflection, agrarian political economy and a specific idea of democracy. Although his federal project was never implemented, some of its elements appear in different forms in contemporary regional initiatives, such as the Visegrád Group (V4), CEFTA or the Three Seas Initiative.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What were the main geopolitical, economic and institutional assumptions of Milan Hodža's concept of a Central European federation?
2. How did the interwar context and Hodža's political experience shape his federal plan?
3. To what extent can Hodža's ideas be considered relevant for the 21st-century debates on regional integration and security in Central and Eastern Europe?

The analysis is guided by a research hypothesis derived from Hodža's own formulation: that Central Europe, organised as a closely integrated regional bloc or federation, must become "a bastion of the national and social security of its peoples" and a key supporting pillar of a stable European security architecture, alongside Western Europe. At the same time, the article critically examines the limits and risks of applying this historical project to contemporary conditions.

Research aims and methodology

The aim of the article is not to provide a comprehensive biography of Milan Hodža, but rather to reconstruct and interpret his concept of Central European federation and to assess its potential applicability in the current geopolitical situation of Central and Eastern Europe. The study is located at the intersection of political thought, international relations and regional studies.

Methodologically, the paper uses:

- Qualitative content analysis of primary sources – mainly Hodža's own texts and speeches – with particular attention to his definitions of Central Europe, his Danube Plan and the project of a federation.
- Critical analysis of secondary literature, including historiographical and political science works devoted to Hodža, agrarian democracy and Central European integration.
- Elements of comparative analysis, by briefly contrasting Hodža's proposals with other integration projects (Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-Europe, Beneš's federal plans and the contemporary Three Seas Initiative).
- Contextual interpretation, placing Hodža's federal ideas within the broader interwar and wartime debates on European order and in relation to current discussions on European security architecture.

The article has the character of a conceptual and interpretive study. It does not use statistical methods or quantitative data analysis; instead, it evaluates the relevance of Hodža's ideas using analytical and comparative criteria drawn from contemporary theories of regional integration and security.

Central Europe as a region

It can be assumed that I am not the first to claim that Central Europe is the region where pulled poppy seed strudel[1] is baked, but also leavened poppy seed roll.[2] And indeed, when I look at the various definitions and reflections on Central Europeanism and the definition of the area of Central Europe, which were created in the same period as the pan-European unification began to be talked about – that is, in the first decades of the 20th century – these, from a geographical point of view, also copy the area of expansion of this delicacies.

[1] The Czech philosopher Václav Cílek claims: "Central Europe is the area where poppy seed strudel is baked." According to the limits of its occurrence, it can be said that this is a given fact and it really is. This delicacy was originally the food of the poor and reached our region around 1453 as a Turkish pastry. At the time of the Turkish invasions, it entered Austria through Slovakia and Hungary. The Turkish soldiers, coming from afar, had with them some supplies of food, among them sweetened, sugar syrup-drenched cakes made of dough thin and layered on top of each other. The sugar syrup preserved the cakes well, so they lasted a long way. Well, that thin dough (also known as filo) inspired people in today's Slovakia or Hungary to bake something similar. But there was no sugar or honey, and even if there was, they were too expensive ingredients, so the idea arose to fill the strudel with what was available. That is, with poppy seeds, apples, cherries, nuts, cottage cheese, even cabbage (this type is author´s favourite and her grandmother knew how to prepare it perfectly). The first written mentions of it date back to 1696, but its boom only occurred in the Teresian period, when Empress Maria Theresa took a liking to it and made it a royal dessert. Even Emperor Franz Joseph I, famous for his moderation, let himself be heard: "A day without strudel is like a sky without stars." Source: L. Hamplova, *Dejiny jablkového dezertu: Spoznajte štrúdľovú monarchiu*, https://hnonline.sk/style/gastro/2247766-dejiny-jablkoveho-dezertu-spoznajte-strudlovu-monarchiu; https://sistersbakery.sk/recipe/tahana-strudla-a-vsetko-co-o-nej-vieme/.

[2] In Tekov region, or in the Nitra-Zlaté Moravce region, it is called a poppy seed cake or simply poppy cake.

As Veber[3] states, the Mitteleuropa-Bibliographie was published in Vienna in 1935 on the issue of the definition of this particular region, which included several thousand items, not only book publications, but also magazine and journalistic articles and reflections. The most prolific author in this area was Elemér Hantos,[4] who understood Central Europe as an independent cultural entity that must resist Americanization – i.e. the influence of Western Europe and North America, which manifests itself primarily in neglecting (overlooking) and orientalization. Interesting is his characterization of Central Europe as a separate region with a special "milieu" that distinguishes it from others, and by which he means a mild climate, a similar lifestyle, diversity and persistence in the economy, a huge racial mixing and an overall unified spiritual connection, given by unique peculiarities, resulting from the coexistence of the Christian and Jewish religions, language development and the competition of the national consciousness of individual Central European ethnic groups. According to him, it was in Central Europe that European culture was born, as the printing press (letter – or book press),[5] the Reformation and partly also the Enlightenment, romanticism and socialism were discovered here.[6]

Victor Bauer[7] thought similarly. He saw Central Europeanisms as a "latent human type," created by the mixing of Slavic, Latin, Germanic, Hungarian and Jewish elements, which created a sense of belonging – a belonging stronger than the linguistic, racial, historical or regional differences of the Central European peoples. According to him, it is a Central Europeanism of a transnational type, able to show other Europeans the way. So, it has a special mission and future.[8]

Central European Federation according to Milan Hodža

However, according to Veber,[9] Hodža's plan for Central European cooperation represents the highlight of all reflections on Central Europeanism and Central Europe and its possibilities for unification, both geographically and politically, culturally and socially or ethnically, which Milan Hodža promoted since 1935.

[3] V. Veber, *Dějiny sjednocené Evropy*, Praha 2004, pp. 147-148.

[4] A professor of economics from Budapest, in the years 1918-1919 he held the post of Minister of Trade in Karolyi's government. He publicly spoke out against Kalergi and proposed the creation of several economic areas – Western European, Baltic (Scandinavian) and Central European, heading, after their own consolidation, to the European customs pact as the basis of European unification.

[5] Hantos included Germany into Central Europe as well.

[6] V. Veber, *Dějiny …*, op. cit., p. 149.

[7] In the work *Střední Evropa – živouci organismus* (Central Europe – a living organism), which was published in Brno in 1936, he proposed the creation of a transnational federation of states with the natural centre in Vienna and with German as the language of communication.

[8] V. Veber, *Dějiny …*, op. cit., p. 150.

[9] Ibidem, p. 151.

Before I move on to the concept of Milan Hodža, let's talk briefly about him and his political life. Milan Hodža was born on February 1, 1878, in Sučany, Martin district and died on June 27, 1944, in Clearwater, USA. He came from an important family of Slovak nationalists and patriots, where the emphasis was on education. He was the nephew of one of the codifiers of the written Slovak language, Michal Miloslav Hodža.[10] He spoke seven languages – Hungarian, German, English, French, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, and Polish. He started his studies at the gymnasium in Banská Bystrica (1888-1890) and continued in Sopron (1890-1894) and in Sibiu (Romania), where he graduated in 1896. He studied law in Budapest and Cluj (1896-1900) and philosophy in Vienna (1916-1918). In 1918 he received the title of Ph.D., in 1921 the title of Univ. prof. and JUDr.h.c. He was the acting president of the Czecho-Slovak Republic, the eleventh prime minister of the Czecho-Slovak government of 1935-1938 (the first Slovak[11]) and several times a minister – for example, for the unification of laws, agriculture, education and, briefly, foreign affairs. He held high Czechoslovak, French, and Italian, Romanian, Yugoslavian and Polish awards.

Milan Hodža worked as a journalist for many years and was already involved in politics during his studies. Even under Austria-Hungary, he worked as an editor in Abendblatt, Slovenský denník (Slovak Daily) which he founded in 1910, and Slovenský týždenník (Slovak Weekly) which he founded in 1903 and was its editor until 1914. He also edited the monthly Naša zástava (Our flag), and collaborated with other periodicals, especially with Hlas (Voice). He worked at the Austrian press office in Vienna too. In 1905, he was elected a member of the Hungarian parliament for the electoral district in Kulpín (today's Serbia, part of Vojvodina). From the beginning of his political career, he dealt with the idea of the cooperation of minority nations in Austria-Hungary. At the time of his entry into active politics, he participated in the cooperation of non-Hungarian peoples in Hungary and as a collaborator of the so-called Belvedere group, assembled around the heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand d'Este, he planned the reconstruction of the monarchy into federally connected Central European states with their own autonomy. However, the plan was not implemented after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo.

On the thirtieth of October 1918, he was among those who signed the Martin Declaration. With this, the Slovak nation signed up for a joint state with the Czechs. After the creation of Czechoslovakia, he first became an ambassador in

[10] The group consisted of Ľudovít Štúr and Jozef Miloslav Hurban.

[11] During the entire existence of Czechoslovakia, there were only four Slovak prime ministers: Milan Hodža, Viliam Široký, Jozef Lenárt and Marián Čalfa.

Budapest (1918-1919). In Czechoslovakia, he belonged to the political leaders of Slovakia. He was a leading figure in the Agrarian Party in Slovakia, later the Republican Party of the Agricultural and Small Peasant People, which he tried to create already during Austria-Hungary. At that time, he worked as part of the Slovak National Party. Thanks to the cooperation with the member of the Slovak group Hlasisti, Vavro Šrobár and Pavol Blaho, he got to know the Czech political scene and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.

At that time, Hodža still saw the possibilities of cooperation between Czechs and Slovaks only in the field of education, culture and economy, rejecting political cooperation. Like Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, he also perceived the dependence of Slovakia's democratization development on movements in Europe and the world. It should be noted that, as a prime minister, he had sharp disputes with later Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš, which continued even after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, and from which Beneš emerged victorious. Hodža rejected Beneš's policy of spheres of influence. In his opinion, the prerequisite for solving the problems of the Central European region is "the freedom of the Central European peoples between Russia and Germany with the exclusion of spheres of influence."[12] According to him, such freedom could be guaranteed in Central Europe only by a federation of these nations, no through any tutor, protector or influential actor, which I absolutely agree with.

In 1936, Hodža wanted to prevent Hitler's expansionist efforts with the Danube Plan, which was supposed to transform Central Europe into an economic space without tariffs. However, Hodža's conception of foreign policy clashed with Beneš's conception with its ties to France and later to the Soviet Union. In 1938, under the pressure of the events in Munich, Hodža resigned and emigrated to France and later to the USA. In emigration, he again developed the idea of a Central European federation, which was to be made up of eight states: Czech Republic, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece. This federation was supposed to be a partner of the great powers, based on Hodža's slogan: I am the master, you are the master!

In the study *Czechoslovakia and Central Europe*, Milan Hodža defined the region of Central Europe as follows: "(...) let's look at Central Europe (...) Geopolitics states that there are two large corridors from north to south on the European continent. The first is the Rhine-Rhône, a strong line from the area around Flushing to Switzerland, then to the south of France to Marseille, supported by alpine passes towards Italy... the second corridor parallel to the Rhône-Rhine corridor, starting

[12] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej Európe a iné štúdie*, Bratislava 1997, p. 305.

at the Vistula, then passing through the passes to Moravia or to the Váh, then to the Czechoslovak, Hungarian and South Slavic Danube, near Belgrade to the Serbian river Moravia, to the Vardar and to Thessaloniki. That's the Central European corridor. Corridors have their civilizational and organizational significance (…)."[13]

The concept of corridors in his reflections and views on geopolitics derives from his recognition of key geographic determinants, especially natural transport and communication routes. He attributes great importance to rivers in particular, which is why the Danube plays an important role in his thoughts on Central Europe, even in the anchoring of Czechoslovakia[14] in it. It is a benchmarking of his definition and characteristics of Central Europe, which he defines geographically as well as economically, ethnically, culturally, civilizationally and power-politically. According to him, this includes, in addition to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Greece. That is a territory of 582,000 square miles, which was not chosen at random, because in size and population it was to be a territory identical with that occupied by Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy together. "Geopolitically... the new Central Europe (...) has the conditions of a regional block: political and economic, also the viewpoints of civilizational affinities and common problems of democracy, national reunification, minorities, Slavism."[15]

As Čurda[16] says, Hodža's approach is dominated by the idea of a bridge that Central Europe should be, perceived as a civilizational link between the European West and the European East and its role in the pan-European arrangement: "Without Central Europe, there is no Pan-Europe... Legitimation of the intermediary between the Western and Eastern civilizations passes to the Western and Southern Slavs, to the Hungarians, to the Romanians, to the Greeks... Between Germany and Russia, a new Central Europe is growing, with its own constitutive

[13] M. Hodža, *Československo a střední Evropa*, [in:] idem, *Články, reči, štúdie*, *IVvol. IV,* Praha 1931, p. 382.

[14] In this way, he also underlined the importance of Slovakia for the geopolitical background of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, which are constantly exposed to the power politics and economic pressure of Germany: "With Slovakia...it gains...another geographical and transport base...the geopolitical base is now the Danube. The middle course of the Danube forms the right means of the great Central European corridor... from Gdynia... to the sea via Thessaloniki...The Danube with its hinterland means...a safe position vis-à-vis the states to the south and an organic connection with them. The Danube and our territorial connection to the east and to Romania and to the north to Poland provides our state with a gravity that is equal on all sides and not just one-sided towards the German transport system...it is precisely the full geographical affiliation to this Central European system that Slovakia brings to the historical countries." (M. Hodža, *Slovensko nie je, nemôže byť a nebude Popoluškou republiky,* [in:] idem, *Články, reči , štúdie, vol. VII,* Bratislava 1934, p. 229).

[15] M. Hodža, *Československo a střední Evropa*..., op. cit., p. 370.

[16] J. Čurda, *Milan Hodža a jeho geopolitické názory*, [in:] *Milan Hodža štátnik a politik, eds. M. Peknik et al.,* Bratislava: 2002, p. 295.

history, related, sometimes even the same guidelines of social development, with the same problems... with the same civilizing task between the West and the East[17]

In Hodža's reasoning, Central Europe was created only in the period after the First World War, and thus it is an area that is unstable in terms of power politics, which is only being sought geopolitically, and in the event that its geopolitical consolidation in the form of a geopolitical actor does not take place, it is threatened with balkanization with subsequent superpower parcelling: "If the block of a new Central Europe is not established, the Balkans will revive, today gravitating towards Central Europe, and with the Balkans, Balkanism and Austria will strive for Anschluss," while highlighting the role of Czechoslovakia[18] and making it responsible for possible failure if it "does not fulfil its role as the initiator of the new geopolitical arrangement, there is a threat of the activation of Hungary and the promotion of a certain form of the Danube Federation under the patronage of Germany."[19]

The starting point, or the geopolitical actor who will take a position between Germany and Russia,[20] should be a unified international, economic and political organization in which the Slavs would play a role that cannot be underestimated: "We are between the millstones (Germany and Russia) and if we do not hurry, to become a millstone ourselves, we will be ground to dust."[21] Therefore, he first came up with the idea of the Little Entente,[22] which was followed by his Danube Plan – which concerned the system of agricultural tariffs and quotas, the system of credits and the regulation of agricultural production and cooperation in the field of industry, but also the harmonization of the activities of posts and telegraphs, the simplification of means of payment and harmonization of foreign exchange and clearing policy, simplification and harmonization of administrative and legislative regulations, regarding the legal guarantees of members of different nationalities,

[17] M. Hodža, *Slovensko nie je, nemôže byť a nebude Popoluškou republiky*, [in:] idem, *Články, reči, štúdie, vol. VII,* Bratislava 1931, p. 405.

[18] Why Czechoslovakia? Because it had a multi-sector and prosperous economy, qualified human potential and a functioning democracy at that time.

[19] M. Hodža, *Československo a střední Evropa*..., op. cit., p. 371.

[20] Hodža clearly defined the position of Central Europe between two great powers, Germany and Russia.

[21] M. Hodža, *Stredná Európa s Poľskom*, [in:] idem, *Články, reči, štúdie, vol. VII*, Bratislava 1934, p. 374.

[22] The Little Entente was an alliance formed in 1920 and 1921 by Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (since 1929 Yugoslavia) with the purpose of common defence against Hungarian revanchism and the prospect of a Habsburg restoration in Austria or Hungary. A collective defence arrangement was signed in Belgrade on August 14, 1920, during a convention Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The treaty guaranteed mutual assistance in the event of an unprovoked attack launched by Hungary against any stipulator. Ratifications were exchanged in Belgrade on February 10, 1921. Subsequently, Edvard Beneš suggested participation in the emerging alliance to Romania on August 17, 1920, but his offer was rejected by the Romanian government. Although the mentioned treaty was signed, it did not serve as a regular allied convention.

i.e. "moving towards a Central European economic unit with a customs union and a common currency"[23] – and culminates in his work, in his legacy *Federation in Central Europe* from 1942. Realizing that his Central Europe is mostly made up of small states, he connected their survival as geopolitical subjects with the need for their integration, renouncing part of their own sovereignty for the sake of their preservation and the possibility of influencing political events: "If we have to bind ourselves, let's bind ourselves with the states socially or culturally or economically related to us or complementary to us. Let's associate with states with which we can form large integral civilizational components... new and new possibilities of productivity, whether intellectual or economic."[24]

When conceiving his federalist plan, he starts from the opinion that nationalism and democracy are "intertwined" in Central Europe, because the so-called defensive nationalism and democracy developed side by side, this is why central Europe is said to be more suitable for democracy than Germany and Italy.[25] The so-called democratic nationalism is a healthy stimulus for state building. It is a general European interest to keep any possible resurgence of aggressive nationalism under control by counterbalancing it – a united force which, by the very fact of its existence, will create a permanent obstacle to its attempts at supremacy. That force should be a federalized Central Europe, which will be a strong partner of Germany. "The Central European nations were weak. Only their federation will be strong...Relations of balance and partnership need a central Europe that will not be a mosaic of a few weak states, but a federation of all...Their federation, not isolated from Western Europe, could offer a remarkable contribution to European security by the sheer fact of its existence."[26] However, the federation was also supposed to improve relations between the Central European states themselves, because common interests and affairs as well as all security and economic advantages will prevail over disputes and rivalries that could stem from territorial claims, or problems with minorities.[27]

Hodža did not see the basis of integration in properly dealing with nationalism, but in the importance of an economic, unified whole. He believed that Central Europe could form an economic unit that would become a counterweight to other economies in Europe. He is based here on his rich experience with agrarianism. According to him, only the agrarian bloc in the 1930s understood the importance

[23] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej ...*, op. cit., pp. 190-192.
[24] M. Hodža, *Československo...*, op. cit., p. 373.
[25] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej ...*, op. cit., pp. 220-221.
[26] Ibidem, p. 221.
[27] Ibidem, p. 222.

of the existence of an economic unit, because then the main economic question and problem was where to place agricultural surpluses. Industry is characteristic of Western Europe, whereas Central Europe is characterized by agriculture. The ideological essence of his federation was to become agrarian democracy as an ideological and political alternative to economic liberalism and liberal democracy and the ideology of the Soviet regime, relying on the peasant state, preserving the great values of liberalism, overcoming what was experienced, rejecting socialist collectivism and applying the principle continuous cooperation in the form of a cooperative. It is a force creating a new social agent – employer and employee in one person as a prerequisite for a compromise between individualism and collectivism.[28] As such, it does not eliminate capital, but democratizes it; at the same time, it democratizes private property and places it on a broader social basis, therefore it should also become a social policy that will not only take into account the interests of industrial workers, but also the raising of the level of the peasant and agricultural worker.[29] Its strength and importance in Central Europe resulted from the number of peasants at that time, which represented the absolute majority in the countries from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Sea.[30]

Aware of the existence of a number of definitions of a federation "from organic but very free cooperation to federal states," Hodža considered it essential to create institutions and mechanisms of joint administration and legislation, which should deal with the agreed common affairs of the federation so that its members have secured benefits from a large economic and political unit. The bodies of this organization with confederal elements were to be the federal president, elected by the prime ministers of the individual states for one year, the federal chancellor, appointed by the president, the federal government, and the federal congress, whose members were to be delegated by national parliaments, federal ministers with portefeuille and national ministers without portefeuille. Responsibilities included joint finance, international trade, foreign policy, defence, posts and communications, transport and other bodies to coordinate legislation, national and economic policy.[31]

[28] In this process, for Hodža, land reform plays an important role. That reform will not only enable better individual management of small and medium-sized farmers, but should also force them to join together in order to withstand the competition with the capitalist large estates, according to Hodža.

[29] N. Krajčovičová, *Program a ciele slovenského agrarizmu v diele Milana Hodžu*, [in:] *Milan Hodža štátnik …,* op. cit., p. 223.

[30] M. Zemko, *Stredná Európa v politických koncepciách Milana Hodžu a Edvarda Beneša za druhej svetovej vojny,* [in:] *Milan Hodža štátnik …,* op. cit., p. 328.

[31] Ibidem, p. 330.

However, its constitution should clearly have been a joint and unified decision of all participating countries: "A spontaneous, autonomous decision will be the basis of the constitution, which must clearly express the will to cooperate for the sake of national and European security."[32] He was aware of the complexity and sensitivity of this act, which it would not be easy at all, saying that "political practice must take into account psychological obstacles. In specific cases, it should accept temporary stages of federation, provided that they are not used as a means of obstruction, but become stages of organic development."[33] The economic basis of the future federation was a customs union, and Hodža also counted on the introduction of a common currency. Vienna was to become the centre of this organization.

According to Lukáč,[34] his idea of a Central European state was supposed to negate some of the mistakes of the Versailles interwar order, to fill the power vacuum after the collapse of the monarchy, and to prevent the power influence of neighbouring great powers. It was supposed to become a bulwark of both German and Russian influence: "Without organized cooperation, the small and weak states of Central Europe would soon be exposed to a new attack against which France and England would not be able to defend them. Therefore, in the interest of our national security and against dynastic propaganda, we must strive to organize the united Central European states... the internal structure of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria will certainly be strong enough to be a geographically, strategically and structurally reliable vanguard of the new Central Europe...the associated Central European states will be able to enter into an agreement with Western Europe financially and economically, as well as diplomatically and militarily."[35] "With a solid block of over 100 million people, as a successful democracy, the union would be a constant lesson and an example of a better and more successful way of life for the neighbours as well. However, it must be a real federation."[36]

In this way, even stable European security architecture, composed of several pillars, was to be created according to him as follows: "European security cannot be built only on Western democracy. Its construction requires another reliable support. It is Central Europe. The same is also in the interests of European democracy. Apart from the West it must also have strong support in Central Europe. Therefore, the affinity, if not the identity, of the democratic ideals and institutions of Western

[32] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej ...*, op. cit., p. 232.
[33] Ibidem, pp. 232-233.
[34] P. Lukáč, *Stredoeurópska federácia v predstavách M. Hodžu,* [in:] *Milan Hodža štátnik ...,* op. cit., *Bratislava 2002,* p. 339.
[35] Cited in: P. Lukáč, *Stredoeurópska federácia ...*, op. cit., p. 339.
[36] M. Múdry, *Milan Hodža v Amerike*, Chicago 1947, p. 183.

and Central European democracy provides satisfactory prospects (...)."[37] Every nation, big or small, must survive and will survive only when it contributes an adequate part to the common moral and material values of humanity. A capable nation excels only in international competition, but in order to excel, it must have moral support, according to Hodža.

He attributes to Slovakia the role of a unifier between Central and Eastern Europe when he writes: "whoever is the master of Slovakia, has the key to the gate of Eastern Europe and the Balkans...The idea of connecting the Danube with Moravia, Oder and Vistula and using the Helvetic Canal with the Rhone and the Rhine for a new economic cooperation of the nations of Central Europe can become feasible under the conditions of modern technology and can be a permanent symbol of the collapse of the former economic protectionism, the recent black history of the European economy. Bratislava, the old Danube city, already visited by Roman legionnaires, can give Europe new values in modern times"[38].

Here I have to point out the role of Poland in this plan coming out from the historical context. Czechoslovakia's relations with Poland were limited, rather strained due to Poland's territorial claims, especially in the Tešín region, at that time. When Jozef Pilsudsky came to power and Poland chose a different path than Czechoslovakia – an authoritarian one – that was the end of even limited co-operation. Although Prague still tried to achieve rapprochement – Beneš tried to do so at least three times from 1921 to 1933 – all efforts practically failed after Poland concluded a German-Polish declaration of non-aggression with Germany after Hitler came to power. This shipwreck was confirmed by the failure of Juraj Slávik's mission in Warsaw in 1936 definitely. Hodža as an experienced politician was fully aware of Poland's great power ambitions in Central Europe, as well as its overseas orientation. For that reason, he did not expect that Poland, even representing the largest number of Slavs in Central Europe, could become the leading nation of the Central European Federation. This assumption of Hodža is confirmed today by the actions of the Polish government, which declares that it wants to turn Poland into "the largest military base of the USA in Europe," which limits and undermines its participation and cooperation within the framework of Central European cooperation in the V4 organization (thereby threatening the position and interests of Central European countries in within the EU), and promotes its own superpower idea of the so-called Three Seas, regardless of which political alternative is currently in power.

[37] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednejEurópe a iné štúdie…*, op. cit., p. 295.

[38] Cited in: S. Mikula, *Dr. Milan Hodža vo svelte archívnych dokumentov z archívov USA*, [in:] *Milan Hodža štátnik …*, op. cit., p. 348.

Back to Hodža, in his last work – the memorandum – *Europe at the Crossroads*, addressed to the American State Department, he outlined the measures that the powers should take against the threat of Sovietization and not resort to the policy of dividing spheres of influence:

1. International cooperation of equal sovereign countries, including joint decisions and joint responsibility. Only in such a political framework can Russia now and after the war become a partner of the United States and Great Britain.
2. The use of all institutions and means, which are necessary prerequisites and tools for the democratic reorganization of European nations, through the free expression of the people. "With a free, united Central Europe, with France that will rise again and, with Russia that will support European and international cooperation, Germany will only be a strong partner, but not a dictator. Without a free Central Europe, there is no guarantee that Europe and some of its overseas neighbours will not be engulfed by totalitarian imperialism."[39]

The ideas presented by Hodža are more than relevant even today. After all, his visions were partially realized after 1989 in the form of such groupings as CEFTA, SEI and V4. They bring some hope that there is an alternative, and under a reasonable constellation, this alternative can begin to materialize. The structures created in this way, including the security ones, based on a regional basis, would form a separate whole and at the same time an organic unity based on the real equal status of the individual units. We still have a chance to create such regional cooperation; its foundations are laid in V4.

In today's discussion about the future and form of the European Union, which is failing in deep economic, health, and political crises, it is good to return to the tradition of pro-European political thinking and look back at what our ancestors offered us, if we ourselves cannot come up with a new vision. And the vision of several regional groupings, whose common superstructure will be Federative Europe – in Hodža's words: "...every European – and pan-European cooperation in particular – needs regional groupings on which it can build," is more than tempting right now. It turns out that Hodža was right when he rejected the policy of spheres of influence. His proposal is based on rejecting such a policy; it is based on the premise of the creation of several equal blocs with approximately the same size of the territory and the number of the population and therefore the same power, which will cooperate – the Western bloc, the Central European bloc and the

[39] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej …*, op. cit., p. 305.

Eastern bloc represented by Russia. His proposal drew possible rivals – Russia and Germany – into equal cooperation, which would lead to the fact that they would not feel excluded or dominant. His vision was to make Central Europe a strong and self-confident region, capable of making its own, free and responsible decisions. No knee-jerk politics to satisfy the interests of one party or the other. Today, the situation is the opposite, and all the more dangerous.

In present day geopolitical situation, it's still not too late. We still have the opportunity to return and build a strong regional grouping in Central Europe with its own security architecture. Hodža's plan provides us with guidance on how to get there. The advantage of such a grouping will be its independence from the patronage of Western Europe and great powers such as the USA, Russia or Germany. Its main task will be to act as a balancer, an element of balance in international relations that will lead to the creation of new and solid security structures, as well as a new European security architecture based on a strong Central European peace force, not on the anachronistic remnants of the Cold War like today's NATO.

Conclusion

The political legacy of Milan Hodža illustrates that the success of far-reaching integration projects depends not only on the quality of ideas, but also on favourable historical circumstances, receptive political elites and a strategic will to cooperate. The analysis conducted in this article shows that Hodža's concept of a Central European federation was deeply rooted in the interwar geopolitical realities, yet it articulated principles that remain relevant for the 21st century. His proposals responded to three central challenges that this study set out in the introduction: the geopolitical vulnerability of small and medium-sized states situated between great powers, the need for an economic model capable of reducing regional disparities, and the search for institutional forms of cooperation that could strengthen both national and European security.

With regard to the first research question, the article demonstrated that Hodža's federal plan rested on a coherent set of geopolitical, economic and institutional assumptions. He envisioned Central Europe as a distinct region shaped by the interplay of civilisational affinities, economic interdependence and similar democratic aspirations. His emphasis on the strategic importance of the north–south corridors, on the Danube as an integrating axis and on the functional complementarity of the states from the Baltic to the Aegean and the Black Sea formed the core of his regional definition.

In response to the second question, the study confirmed that Hodža's federal thinking was inseparable from his political experience: from attempts to reform the Habsburg monarchy, through efforts to stabilise the interwar Czechoslovak Republic, to reflections shaped by the collapse of the Versailles order. His Danube Plan and later the project of a Central European Federation emerged as an answer to the structural weaknesses of the region – fragmentation, economic asymmetries and exposure to external domination.

Finally, in addressing the third research question concerning contemporary relevance, the article showed that although the political and economic landscape of Central and Eastern Europe has changed profoundly since Hodža's time, several of his insights remain instructive. The persistence of geopolitical tensions, the search for a more balanced European security architecture and the renewed interest in regional cooperation demonstrate that the problems identified by Hodža have not lost their significance. His conviction that Central Europe must become a "bastion of national and social security" retains interpretive value when assessing today's debates on the role of regional groupings within the broader European framework.

From this perspective, Hodža's warning appears strikingly prescient "Only a free Central Europe without spheres and, sooner or later, a Central European Federation can effectively prevent Germany from regaining hegemony in Central Europe or from achieving a leading position in future Europe… Without a free Central Europe, there is no guarantee that Europe and some of its overseas neighbours will not be engulfed by totalitarian imperialism."[40]

In light of current geopolitical developments, including the war in Ukraine and the accompanying reconfiguration of European security priorities, Hodža's reflections offer conceptual guidance rather than a ready-made institutional blueprint. They underscore the importance of strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing political coordination among the countries of Central Europe and developing mechanisms that increase their collective capacity to formulate and defend shared interests. While the conditions for establishing a formal federation in the sense envisaged by Hodža may not be present, the underlying principles of his project – partnership, equality of states, rejection of spheres of influence and the creation of balanced regional pillars within Europe – remain analytically valuable.

Thus, the issues outlined in the introduction – the crisis of the European security order, the search for alternative models of cooperation and the need for a stronger regional dimension within Europe – confirm the enduring relevance

[40] M. Hodža, *Federácia v strednej Európe a iné štúdie*, Bratislava 1997, p. 305.

of Hodža's federal thinking. His vision of a cohesive and confident Central Europe, capable of contributing to the stability of the continent, continues to provide an important intellectual framework for contemporary discussions on the future of the region.

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