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IFF Working Paper Online No 46

Federalism's Illusion: Conceptual Insights into East Central Europe, 1831–1926¹

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April 2025

Citation: Korolov, G., Federalism's Illusion: Conceptual Insights into East Central Europe, 1831–1926, IFF Working Paper Online No 46., Fribourg, April 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.51363/unifr.diff.2025.46>

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¹ This article is part of a project that has received funding from the SNF Scientific Exchanges Grant.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51363/unifr.diff.2025.46>

ISSN: 2813-5261 (Online)

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Abstract

This paper explores the ideological use and limited implementation of federalism in East Central Europe from 1831 to 1926, a region shaped by diverse national identities and the dominance of imperial powers. Federalism, widely promoted as a potential solution for unifying multiethnic societies under a shared political framework, primarily served as a rhetorical device rather than a practical model for governance. National movements and emerging states leveraged federalist ideas as tools to legitimize territorial claims, secure political authority, and establish cultural autonomy from imperial structures. However, the paper argues that national leaders consistently subordinated federalist principles to the pragmatic demands of nation-building, which prioritized ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. Despite federalism's appeal as an inclusive model, its adaptation in East Central Europe was constrained by nationalist agendas, anti-imperial sentiments, and the instrumentalization of ideology for geopolitical maneuvering. This study highlights how federalist discourse in East Central Europe evolved from a utopian concept into an element of Realpolitik, illuminating broader tensions between ideology and practical governance in the region's history.

Keywords

Federalism, East Central Europe, history, ideology, instrumentalization, Realpolitik

A) Introduction

In 1912, Russian legal scholar and a professor at St. Petersburg University Aleksandr Yashchenko (1877-1934) eloquently stated that “all types of national federalism, which usually divide nations, are an extreme expression of provincialism, a bygone stage of the political life of mankind”². In his understanding federalism is first and foremost a theory for improving existing political systems, and then an ideology of national struggle and emancipation. Yashchenko had in mind the Russian Empire and the high political role it would play in Eastern Europe in a broad sense.

In 1926, Sorbonne-based Polish legal scholar Halina Zasztowt-Sukiennicka (1900-1998) shared the following correct conclusion in her doctoral dissertation about federalism’s “strange nature” in Eastern Europe: “It was a ‘vicious circle’ because, on the one hand, local peculiarities and the mixed population of the countries created a favorable situation for the development of federalism, which could possibly satisfy all interests, and on the other hand, these same peculiarities became an insurmountable obstacle to the positive implementation of federalism during the restoration and formation of nations.”³ Zasztowt-Sukiennicka’s thesis suggested that various federalist projects were proposed and conceptualized not to resolve national, ethnic, or religious contradictions but to ensure the territorial legitimization of empires and, paradoxically, future nation-states.

Yashchenko’s and Zasztowt-Sukiennicka’s statements largely coincided with the prevailing perception of federalism among national movements in East Central Europe. So-called small or non-historical (non-state) peoples existed under the rule and pressure of empires. In the “long 19th century,” federalism was regarded in three dimensions: as a form of idealistic political system; as an ideological slogan and in programs to improve the empire’s political system; and as an element of political rhetoric in legitimizing new states, policies addressing national minorities, and introducing a republican system. Some scholars today view federalism as a potential solution to the national question in East Central Europe—a perspective that may oversimplify complex historical realities⁴.

This paper argues that East Central European national movements often treated federalism as a rhetorical device rather than a practical solution, intending it as an ideological tool to advance specific political goals.⁵ The main argument of this paper is that, in national movements’ ideology

² Jaščenko, A. *Teorija federalizma: Opyt sintetičeskoj teorii prava i gosudarstva* (Jur'ev, 1912), s. 767.

³ Zasztowt-Sukiennicka, H. *Fédéralisme en Europe Orientale* (Paris 1926), p. 107-108.

⁴ Trencsényi, B. Janowski, M., Baár, M., Falina, M., and Kopeček M., *A History of Modern Political Thought in East-Central Europe: Volume I: Negotiating Modernity in the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’* (Oxford, 2016), p. 512–529; Osterkamp, J., “Föderale Schwebelage. Die Habsburgermonarchie als politisches Mehrebenensystem,” in: *Föderalismus in historisch vergleichender Perspektive. Bd. 2: Föderale Systeme: Kaiserreich - Donaumonarchie - Europäische Union*, (Baden-Baden, 2015), p. 197–219; *Vision Europa. Deutsche und polnische Föderationspläne des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*, Duchhardt, H. von and M. Morawiec (eds.), (Mainz, 2003).

⁵ Recently I have been presented some conceptual and empirical studies on the history of East Central Europe’s federalism, see: Korolov, G. *Federatyvni projekty v Tsentral’no-Shidnii Evropi (1815-1921): vid Ideolohichnoi Utopii do Real’noi Polityki [Federalist Projects in East Central Europe (1815-1921): From Ideological Utopia to Realpolitik Policy]* (Kyiv, 2019); Korolov, G. “Polish federalist ideas between utopia and Realpolitik: geopolitical dimension and ideological entanglements (1863–1921)”, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, vol. 31, issue 4, 2024, p. 549-564

and after the emergence of nation-states in 1917–1923, the tendency to use federalist rhetoric in the formation of “nationalized” territories, historical legitimism and expansionism in political rhetoric became more evident—despite no indication of a federal system’s implementation. National movements’ representatives and new national elites asserted the federalism as a one of the solutions to the problem of nation-building as a possible conflict between national, ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, they mostly defended this solution based on their own political ambitions, ideological weaknesses, and situational geopolitical preferences. This approach reflects the interplay between nationalism, imperialism, and ideological pragmatism in the region’s political landscape.

This paper, therefore, seeks to address a critical question: why were federalism and federal structures never realized in East Central Europe during the 19th and first half of 20th centuries? Two primary factors appear to underlie this historical development:

- 1) The nation-building process, which ultimately marginalized federalist structures in East Central Europe.
- 2) The instrumentalization of federalist ideas within political and intellectual thought, adapting these concepts to align with specific national or geopolitical goals.

These two factors made implementing federalist principles in the state system impossible, and they made building a federal state even less possible. Instead, the history of federalist ideas in East Central Europe reveals their transformation into tools for ideological expression and political rhetoric, employed in response to unique historical circumstances and the shifting geopolitical needs of emerging nation-states. Federal structures have historically formed through the political and social system that would be the basis for implementing the federal model—for example, the *veche*⁶ in the history of Kyivan Rus or the noble *sejmiks* in the history of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁷ This study will examine the formation of modern nations in East Central Europe during the “long 19th century” and the evolving ideological use of federalist ideas within that process.

B) The Formation of Modern Nations

The development of modern nations in East Central Europe unfolded across complex historical, social, and ideological landscapes shaped by ethnic and linguistic distinctions. Notably, the “long 19th century” (approximately 1789–1914) saw national movements emerging in a region dominated by multiethnic empires—the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, and later, German. These empires imposed centralized rule that often limited local autonomy and suppressed linguistic and

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2023.2269965>; Korolov, G. “Between Intermarium and Eastern Switzerland: Belarusian and Ukrainian Federalist Projects, Imperializing Nations, and the Making of National Territories (1914–1920)”, *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 42, 2021, p. 23–36; Korolov, G. „Die Idee der belarussisch-ukrainischen Föderation: Von der Realpolitik zur Utopie (1918–1920)“, *Nordost-Archiv*, Band XXVII: *Krieg und Frieden. Folgen der Russischen Revolution von 1917 im östlichen Europa*, Lüneburg 2020, p. 52–66.

⁶ Veche was a local people’s assembly in the history of Kyivan Rus.

⁷ Halecki, O. The Problem of Federalism in the History of East Central Europe, *The Polish Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, Summer 1960, p. 5–19.

cultural expressions, fostering a unique blend of nationalist aspirations and anti-imperial sentiments. East Central European national movements were driven by a desire for political self-determination, a goal further complicated by the region's demographic diversity and mixed ethnic territories.

Today, several concepts periodize national liberation movements in East Central Europe and nation-building process in “long 19th century”. Czech historian Miroslav Hroch's model of national movement development—comprising phases of cultural awareness, patriotic agitation, and political mobilization—provides a useful framework to understand East Central European nationalism⁸. In the early 19th century (Phase A), intellectual elites in Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland began documenting and preserving local languages and folklore. These efforts were more than mere cultural revivals; they underscored a growing belief that linguistic and cultural unity was foundational to national identity. By the mid-19th century (Phase B), patriotic societies were disseminating nationalist ideas, framing ethnic identity as an anchor for political rights and resistance to imperial control. The culmination of these processes occurred toward the end of the 19th century (Phase C), as mass movements mobilized for political autonomy. Unlike Western European models that increasingly integrated civic principles, East Central European nationalism adhered strongly to an ethnolinguistic model. This emphasis on language and ethnicity became central to the region's nation-building efforts, even as national groups occupied overlapping territories that complicated the boundaries of emerging states. This ethnolinguistic focus fueled a drive for political separation from empires, where ethnic Poles, Ukrainians, and Czechs demanded recognition in systems traditionally dominated by Austrian, Russian, or German cultural hegemony. The popular nationalism theories of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson do not work in the East Central European context; rather, they distort historical facts and process. Nationalism cannot be seen as one of the modern ideologies; instead, it must be regarded as a significant historical stage and political movement. Therefore, as Polish philosopher Andrzej Walicki, who criticized Gellner, observed, if the nation is “conditional,” imaginary, and fictitious, the question arises as to why cultural homogenization was not fully realized for the peoples of East Central Europe and did not result from “ideological manipulations by a handful of influential philologists, historians, and writers.”⁹

The critical factor in answering this question is that modern nations in East Central Europe were formed on linguistic and ethnographic bases, and civic principles were considered dangerous for socio-political consolidation¹⁰. All nation-building projects were based primarily on the ethnic model, in which the dominant or titular nation can or could include and assimilate representatives of other peoples and ethnic groups. Also, some nations, such as the Polish and Czech nations, already existed as premodern political communities. Others, meanwhile, such as Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Slovak communities, appeared in history as political nations only in the 19th century. The emergence of Ukrainians, Czechs, and Slovaks can be seen as a process of transforming

⁸ Hroch, M. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁹ Walicki, A. Ernest Gellner and the ‘Constructivist’ Theory of Nation in: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998), p. 611–619.

¹⁰ About this national movement's transformation, see Chlebowczyk, J. *O prawie do bytu małych i młodych narodów. Kwestia narodowa i procesy narodotwórcze we wschodniej Europie środkowej w dobie kapitalizmu (od schyłku XVIII do początków XX w.)* (Warszawa-Kraków, 1983), p. 38-55.

premodern peoples—respectively, Poles, Russians, Hungarians, and Germans¹¹. In this context, Poles—who lost the old Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (after three partitions at the end of 18th century) precisely when modern nationalism emerged but continued to form in the context of the Habsburg and Russian empires—present an illustrative example.

The most significant event in East Central Europe's history was the three partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. In turn, they eliminated the possibility of building federal structures, elements of which were absorbed by empires: demolishing the system of noble local sejmiks and local sejmik's courts. At the same time, the project of a Slavic aristocratic republic that would resist empires appeared (Adam Czartoryski's project of the Polish–Russian federation, 1806).¹² The other two events in East Central European history were the Russian Empire emergence on the stage of European international politics after the November Uprising in 1831 and the Habsburg monarchy's 1868 constitutional restructuring. Empires' influence contributed to the rise of ethnic and linguistic nationalism, for which colonial oppression was primarily associated with banning the use of mother tongues, national languages or limiting cultural development opportunities. Almost all national projects in East Central Europe reflected this trend, the abolishment of the usage the Polish and Ukrainian languages under Romanov rule or Polish language under the German were regarded as a policy of annihilation of these nations.

The “long 19th century” included several successful imperial assimilation processes in East Central Europe, such as Russification or Germanization. However, while Russia's case was an attempt to create a triune Russian people as a mono-national political community, Germany's case was a process of totally absorbing small (non-state) peoples in the East, especially Poles. On the periphery of these processes, other national entities died out (such as Ruthenians and Cossacks in the Russian Empire and in general Kashubians in Germany). New nation-building programs emerged during the 19th century, rebelling against the state as such, which were associated with empire and oppression. In the perception of the national movement's representatives, multiethnic, religious, and legal diversity revealed empires' backwardness, as opposed to the seemingly unstoppable progress of ethnically homogeneous nation-states.¹³ This tension was among the fundamental elements of national movements' ideological rhetoric in East Central Europe. Federal structures' extinction and federalism's evolution should be considered in this context.

East Central European national movements also linked ethnic identity with economic modernization, interpreting economic advancement as a path to liberation from imperial rule. Leaders believed that economic self-sufficiency would support cultural and linguistic preservation, further reinforcing the importance of national unity. Industrialization, however, introduced new tensions, particularly in regions where economic centers overlapped with mixed ethnic populations. This was evident in places like Silesia and Eastern Galicia, where Poles, Germans, and Ukrainians vied for economic and cultural dominance. National movements sought to frame economic progress within an ethnonationalist paradigm, emphasizing that true modernization would only be achieved

¹¹ Šporljuk, R. Ukrajina: vid impers'koji okrajiny do nezaležnoji deržavy, in: Šporljuk R. *Formuvannja modernych nacij: Ukrajina, Rosija, Pol'sča*, (Kyjv, 2013), p. 437.

¹² Bokajło, W. Polnische Konzepte einer Europäischen Föderation : zwischen den "Vereinigten Staaten von Europa" und dem konföderalen Mitteleuropa (1917-1939) in: *Vision Europa. Deutsche und polnische Föderationspläne des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*, Duchhardt, H. von and M. Morawiec (eds.) (Mainz, 2003), p. 85-116.

¹³ Leonhard, J. Multi-Ethnic Empires and Nation-Building: Comparative Perspectives on the late Nineteenth Century and the First World War, in: *Nationalizing Empires*, A. Miller and S. Berger (eds.) (Budapest, 2015), p. 630.

by ending imperial rule and asserting control over the local economy.

During the “long 19th century”, various federalist projects were conceived and emerged in reaction to the historical situation and geopolitical location between Germany and Russia. This dichotomy was most important for national movements’ ideological development. Before 1914, when World War I began, empires’ nationalization process was underway; but after their collapse, nations’ imperialization began. More illustrative in this regard is the perception of various federalist proposals among East Central Europe’s national movements, as Maciej Górny recently noted. Mostly, these proposals did not consider other points of view; “everyone spoke of unity but had their own interests in mind.”¹⁴

The new national leaders rhetorically embraced the federalization concept. Often, they invoked the federalist idea without any intention to implement it. The emergence—or, rather, transformation—of modern nations into imperializing nations in East Central Europe reflected the strange nature of the nascent nation-states. On the one hand, after World War I, they adapted elements of various ideological theories (republicanism, monarchical traditions, or old socio-political hierarchies) into their state systems. On the other hand, they modified norms of former imperial legislation. However, it should be recognized that anti-imperial beliefs played an important role in constructing ideas about national territory and new nation-states’ international legal recognition. In this way, political theorists and activists defined their sphere of influence and original historical or ethnic space where nationalizing nations had not yet fully formed their proclaimed identities based on ethnic and linguistic understanding.

This imperial backdrop intensified the desire among East Central European peoples for ethnically homogeneous states, seen as a defense against imperialist assimilation. Federalism, although invoked rhetorically, rarely translated into practical political solutions. National leaders used federalist language to garner support from ethnic minorities, but in practice, they pursued centralized models that prioritized the dominant national identity, as seen in post-imperial Poland’s treatment of ethnic Ukrainians and Lithuanians. The leaders of emerging states, such as Józef Piłsudski in Poland, promoted the idea of a federalized state only insofar as it advanced Polish territorial ambitions, often disregarding the autonomy of non-Polish ethnic groups.¹⁵ In East Central Europe, the contradiction between the process of nationalizing new states’ territories, introducing a republican system, the geopolitical calculation and preserving the imperial legal framework was evident in many cases. Belarusian Prime Minister Anton Lutskevich (1918) and the head of the Ukrainian Central Rada Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1917–1918) were ready to federalize their countries, but only on the condition that Vilnius (Wilno, Vilnia) and Lithuania or Eastern Galicia would become part of their nation-states. The leader of the right-wing Polish National-Democratic Party, Roman Dmowski, also accepted the formula of federalization, but only if Gdańsk (Danzig), East Prussia, and Lithuania were recognized as part of the new Poland.¹⁶ Moreover, Tomáš Masaryk’s regarded

¹⁴ Górny, M. *Polska bez cudów. Historia dla dorosłych* (Warszawa, 2022), p. 107.

¹⁵ Grünberg, K. *Polskie koncepcje federalistyczne 1864–1918* (Warszawa, 1971); Dziwanowski, M. *Joseph Piłsudski: A European Federalist, 1918–1922* (Stanford University, 1969).

¹⁶ Memorjał R. Dmowskiego o zagadnieniach Europy środkowej i wschodniej (Problems of Central and Eastern Europe), wręczony A. J. Balfourowi przed jego wyjazdem w misji urzędowej do Ameryki i wydrukowany następnie w lipcu 1917 r. w Londynie”, in *Akty i dokumenty dotyczące sprawy granic Polski na Konferencji Pokojowej w Paryżu 1918–1919*, cz. 1: Program terytorjalny delegacji, zebra. i wyd. przez Sekretariat Jeneralny Delegacji Polskiej (Paris, 1920), p. 31.

the creation of Czechoslovakia as a new Switzerland, employing similar territorial content to ensure the state's territorial integrity.

C) Ideological Instrumentalisation

Federalism's ideological instrumentalization in East Central Europe manifested in calls for federalism, its simplification in political actions.¹⁷ This process was also facilitated by the lack of serious academic and intellectual discussions about the fundamental federalist ideas and the disappearance of elements of federal structure.¹⁸ Essentially, federalist ideas were degraded, perceived only as follows:

- 1) In the imperial and post-imperial period from 1831-1923, as a situational model for ensuring territorial expansion through the concept of historical legitimacy.
- 2) A possible solution to new nations' problem of international security.

Throughout the 19th and the first half of 20th centuries, three distinct types of federalism emerged in East Central Europe, each rooted in different ideological and strategic objectives:

- 1) Transformative Federalism: This form, inspired by the historical and legal models of federative states like the United States and Switzerland, aimed to reshape empires or establish new nation-states by adopting federative political structures. This type of federalism envisioned East Central Europe as a region of united but autonomous political entities, with governance structures that balanced unity with regional diversity.
- 2) Ethnic-National Federalism: Rooted in nationalistic and ethnographic ideals, this model proposed that a federation could be structured along ethnic and linguistic lines, allowing nation-states to maintain internal harmony by accommodating diverse ethnic groups. This approach often appealed to emerging national identities, proposing a model that respected historical territories while aligning with ethnonational boundaries.
- 3) Defensive Geopolitical Federalism: This third form of federalism was primarily geopolitical, aiming to create a bloc of federated states in East Central Europe to counterbalance the influence of German and Russian imperialism. Leaders in the region envisioned this as a strategic alliance of smaller states, united against external threats, to secure regional stability and autonomy.

Each type of federalism reflected distinct but overlapping political strategies. Transformative Federalism was part of a broader effort to decentralize power, democratize governance, and engage citizens in the political process. Ethnic-National Federalism was employed as a tactical

¹⁷ On the concept of federalism in 19th century Polish political and intellectual thought, see: Górný, M. „Federacja i terminy pokrewne w historii polskiej myśli politycznej od lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku”, in *Z dziejów pojęć społeczno-politycznych w Polsce: XVIII–XX wiek*, M. Janowski (red.) (Warszawa, 2019), p. 143-161.

¹⁸ Kul'chickij (Mazoveckij), K. *Avtonomiya i federaciya v sovremennykh konstitucionnykh gosudarstvakh*. (Moskva, 1907).

response to specific political challenges, particularly the issue of minority rights, and was often a bargaining tool in territorial negotiations. Defensive Geopolitical Federalism focused on collective security, with leaders of emerging national movements viewing federal alliances as essential for resisting domination by neighboring empires.

The first type was an aspect of a broader political strategy—that is, it concerned improving the nature of power as such, as well as powers' distribution, democratization, and appeal to society. The second type was a situational political tactic aimed at solving specific political problems, such as a solution of the national minority issue and was an argument on the territorial negotiations. The third type was a project to ensure regional security, which the leaders of national movements and nation-states saw a threat from Germany and Russia initially. However, these three types overlapped in practice. They shared the idea of a nation-state and even empires' transformation into such a state, which was fundamental to East Central Europe's national liberation movements. These three types reflect the modifications to and evolution of federalism. The newly minted Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Slovak elites of all political spectrums used the federalist idea in two dimensions: as a possible solution to the problem of shaping the territory of nation-state; as a basis for the creation of an interstate geopolitical association. In both cases, they defended this decision based on their own political ambitions, ideological weaknesses, and geopolitical preferences. These three federalist models materialized in various political projects:

- 1) The “United States” of small nations, such as the “United States between the Baltic and Black Seas” proposed by Anton Lutskievich in 1915, Paderewski's “United States of Poland” in 1917, Hrushevsky's “United States of Ukraine” in 1920, and Milan Hodža's “United States of Central Europe” in 1920. These projects echoed the federal models of the United States and Switzerland, suggesting a federated structure that could unify small nations.
- 2) National federalism projects, which aimed at internal federalization, exemplified by Otto Eichelmann's draft constitution for the federal Ukrainian People's Republic in 1920-1921 and the Czechoslovak Constitution of the same year, which granted limited autonomy to Subcarpathian Rus.
- 3) Geopolitical federalist initiatives, such as the Polish Intermarium, Karel Kramář's Slavic empire concept, Mykhailo Hrushevsky's Black Sea Federation, Oskar Jászi's Danube Confederation, and Tomáš Masaryk's “New Europe” and Democratic Mid-European Union in 1918. These projects aimed to create defensive alliances to counterbalance the influence of external powers.

Each project emerged from specific political or geopolitical circumstances, often using federalism as a rhetorical tool to argue for the reorganization of state systems. Federalist rhetoric frequently emphasized the need to protect national interests and stabilize the region.

The first key idea was applied in such projects as Anton Lutskievich's “United States between the Baltic and Black Seas” in 1915, Ignacy Jan Paderewski's “United States of Poland” in 1917, Mykhailo Hrushevsky's “United States of Ukraine” in 1920, Milan Hodža's “United States of Central Europe” in 1920. The concept of a United States of Europe disappeared from the ideological horizon after the 1880s. The second key idea mostly appeared in schemes to internally federalize nascent nation-states and various ideas for joint federation with neighboring countries. Examples include the draft constitution of the federal Ukrainian People's Republic by Otto

Eichelmann in 1920 and the constitution of Czechoslovakia in 1920, which retained the former Habsburg system of local government and granted autonomy to Subcarpathian Rus. The third idea involved the creation of large geopolitical associations, such as the Polish Intermarium and the project of a Slavic empire (Karel Kramář), the Black Sea federation (Mykhailo Hrushevsky), the Danube Confederation of nationalities (Oskar Jászi), and Tomáš Masaryk's "New Europe" and the Democratic Mid-European Union in 1918.

All of these projects were undoubtedly developed under specific political or geopolitical circumstances, using federalism only as a strong argument in discussions about the importance of improving the state system. Elements of federal rhetoric always emerged alongside the goal of defending national interests (Andrzej Walicki).¹⁹ As is well known, the main goal of Polish eastern policy in 1918–1923 was to restore the borders of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth of 1772; the Constitution of Czechoslovakia proclaimed the existence of the Czechoslovak people and the common Czechoslovak language, while the leaders of the Ukrainian People's Republic mentioned the federal system in the context of preserving territorial integrity within Ukrainians' ethnographic borders. Masaryk's idea of a "Slavic Switzerland" attempted to preserve Central Europe's geopolitical eccentricity, while the projects of "Eastern Switzerland" for the Polish–Lithuanian state, Hungary, and Ukraine sought to create a powerful nation-state between Germany and Russia, and other federalist projects aimed at similar goals.

Federalism's historical background and ideological trajectories show why it was never realized as a governmental or political system in East Central Europe. It was used as an ideological concept for national legitimization and Realpolitik foreign policy. Practically, all federal ideas concerning the new states' internal structures shared a common feature: the proclamation of temporary loyalty to national minorities (or non-dominant national groups) and the desire to form the *Staatenbund* as a nation-state. The examples of national–personal autonomy's introduction in Ukraine in 1918 and Estonia in 1926, as well as nominal statements about the importance of granting autonomy to Subcarpathian Rus and Eastern Galicia in the 1920s, are quite illustrative.

After World War I, Ukrainians and Belarusians regarded federalism as a model for legitimizing nation-states (for example, through the creation of the Black Sea Federation, the "United States between the Baltic and Black Seas"). Lithuanian, Polish, and Hungarian politicians, meanwhile, furnished the federalist ideology with authoritarian and geopolitical content (the idea of Eastern Switzerland, the concept of the Intermarium, and the Danube Confederation). The Czechoslovak elites perceived this idea as a guide to implementing possible decentralization within the Czechoslovak nation. In fact, East Central European federalism has never been the focus of serious political intentions. It remained an element of mere political rhetoric, especially in the context of choosing a political system, resolving an internal national issue, or creating interstate associations as geopolitical blocs of states.

Federalism in East Central Europe, therefore, remained more of an ideological concept than a fully realized political system. It served as a legitimizing framework for Realpolitik ambitions, blending national aspirations with strategic alliances. This tendency is reflected in the constitutions and statements of the period, which, while occasionally referencing federalism, were more committed to consolidating nation-states with centralized governance and limited autonomy for

¹⁹ On the notion „national interest”, see: Walicki, A. Trzy patriotyzmy, in: Walicki A. *Polskie zmagania y wolnościq* (Kraków, 2000), p. 225-270.

minorities. Ultimately, federalism in East Central Europe did not evolve into a sustainable model for governance. Instead, it became a rhetorical device for nation-building, territorial claims, and interstate relations, often invoked but rarely implemented in practice.

D) Conclusion

The history of federalism in East Central Europe demonstrates its significant yet ultimately rhetorical role in the national liberation movements and state-building efforts of the 19th and the first half of 20th centuries. Despite federalism's theoretical appeal as a model for unifying diverse ethnic and religious groups under an inclusive framework, it was rarely viewed as a viable political system in practice. Instead, East Central European leaders invoked federalist concepts to support territorial claims, secure legitimacy, and present their states as culturally and politically distinct from the empires that once dominated them.

The two defining features of national liberation movements in East Central Europe—anti-imperialism and a commitment to protecting national languages and cultures—shaped the region's unique brand of federalism. In contrast to Western models, federalism in East Central Europe hinged on ethnic and linguistic cohesion. Thus, federalist proposals largely reflected these priorities, with the concept evolving more as a nationalistic slogan than as a realistic structural solution. This tension between theoretical federalism and its impracticality in a political landscape defined by ethnic nationalism is central to understanding the limitations of federalist projects in the region. Further complicating this situation was the historical trajectory of federalism as a tool in *Realpolitik*. From efforts like the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to projects such as the Intermarium, federalism served strategic interests more than state-building ambitions. Leaders in Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary often saw federalism as a way to balance against German and Russian imperialism. However, federalist structures remained elusive, with national movements instead consolidating power through centralized states that marginalized minority interests.

Federalism's fate in East Central Europe underscores an enduring irony: while its ideas permeated national rhetoric and foreign policy, federalism never emerged as a cornerstone of governance. Instead, it served as an ideological tool, used to promote national sovereignty or justify territorial claims but not to establish an inclusive, stable political system. This historical precedent illustrates the broader challenges of applying federalist ideals to contexts where national identities are rooted in linguistic and ethnic distinctions.

Today, East Central Europe's complex national identities and historical legacies still bear traces of the region's 19th-century federalist discourse. These legacies reflect a duality where national unity is sought within an ethnic framework, yet the political vocabulary of federalism remains as a rhetorical artifact. Studying these ideas offers insights into the ways ideologies are adapted—or constrained—by geopolitical realities. Ultimately, federalism in East Central Europe serves as a historical case study of how ambitious political theories can transform within specific national contexts, evolving from ideological vision to mere rhetorical symbol.

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