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Research in Social Change

A RETROSPECTION OF THE IDEA OF EUROPE BASED ON BRAGUE'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Europe is a concept that has constantly changed its meaning throughout history, adapting it to the circumstances of each time. The purpose of this article is therefore to highlight these circumstances and to present them in a way that follows the three meanings of Europe as proposed by Rémi Brague.

Keywords

Europe • idea • myth • Christianity • peace • nations

1. Introduction

Each concept should normally have its own content and scope, which in the case of continents is represented by boundaries. A concept that does not have clearly defined boundaries is, thus, as proposed by Novak (2009), vague. The consequence of the vagueness of the boundaries is that it is very difficult to talk about the content that is supposed to be inherent in the concept itself.

When trying to define Europe as a concept, it is therefore important to bear in mind that the very vagueness of the borders, and consequently of the content, makes this a very thankless exercise. This is also the position taken by Bargue (2003, 13) when he argues that Europe denotes an area that is not a problem to sketch quickly, but a problem arises when it is necessary to define clear boundaries for this area.

The indeterminacy of the boundary then goes hand in hand with the vagueness of the content. In the case of Europe, it could even be said that it is the content that defines its boundaries, not the other way around, i.e. that defining the boundary is a prerequisite for defining the content. The question that presents itself here is: how has this vagueness of content been expressed over time and space? The purpose of this article is precisely to provide an answer to the aforementioned question. In order to be as clear and comprehensive as possible in answering it, we have opted for a chronological presentation. We have also named the chapters accordingly, in an attempt to summarise the following thought, which seemed to us to be more than a ready starting point for the beginning of our research: Europe "entered history as a myth, survived antiquity as a vague geographical notion, became identified with the Christian world in the Middle Ages, became a culture in the modern era, and in modernity has become at first a divided and then an increasingly unified political space (…)" (Toplak 2003, 20).

1.1. Methodological approach

Due to the specificity of the topic of the scientific article, we decided to follow a methodological approach based on the analysis of secondary sources, in particular relevant books and scientific articles. This approach was chosen mainly because it offered us access to the most comprehensive and validated forms of information relevant to our research. We are aware that the research could have been enriched by the inclusion of other sources, but we consider that the existing sources are also sufficient to achieve the objectives of our research. After all, this is a summary of one of the more extensive chapters we have included in our master thesis (see Bratina 2020).

1.2. Research question

This article aims to answer the following question through a descriptive analysis of secondary sources: *How has the idea of Europe changed or evolved over time and space, and what does it mean today*?

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2. Ancient Europe

2.1. Mythological-etymological origins

Europa is said to have been named after Queen Europa, daughter of the Phoenician king Agenor, who one day was gathering flowers in a meadow by the seashore with two of her companions (Mastnak 2001, 185). It was then that Zeus, transformed into a snow-white bull with small horns and a black stripe on his forehead, approached her and fell in love with Europa. She was at first frightened of the white bull, but then, realising that it was a gentle bull that would do her no harm, she began to play with it. She put flowers in his mouth and decorated his little horns with garlands. After a while, Europa climbed on the bull's back and he carried her along the shore until he suddenly swam into the water. Europa is said to have grabbed the peaceful bull by the horns with one hand, both frightened and surprised by what he was doing, while still clutching the basket of flowers tightly with the other. Zeus took her as far as Crete, where he impregnated her
(A. Novak 2009).

As Le Goff (2006, 19) argues, it is in this myth that we should look for the origins of the imagination of the West and the East, including the highlighting of the fundamental differences between them. As Novak (2009) points out, this thesis is supported by a number of later depictions, showing Europa on the one hand as a beautiful and virtuous young woman, which is supposed to represent the West, and on the other hand Zeus, depicted as a monster and a kidnapper, which is supposed to express the East.

According to Hay (1995, 49–52), the myth is the one requiring deeper examination for a more illustrative explanation of the fact that at one time in the past the semiotic word for the setting sun and darkness (erib) was transferred from the land of the Phoenicians to Greek territory. Similarly, Boden (200, 10) additionally mentions the word asu, which is supposed to denote the land of the rising sun, which in turn is supposed to be Asia. Hegel (1967, 117) sees in the above observations a confirmation of the thesis that the development of universal history proceeds in a linear fashion from the extreme East, where he places Asia, to the extreme West, with Europe as the centre of world history.

2.2. Searching for geographical and personal characteristics

If we assume that it was the Greeks who 'invented' the concept of Europe, then we can at the same time argue that as Greek colonisation progressed between the 9th and 6th centuries BC, the concept also began to take on a spatial meaning. In other words, Europe could also be thought of in such a way that you could point to it on a map (Hay 1995, 23–24). In this context, it is worth noting Herodotus' tripartite division of the world, i.e. the division of the world into Europe, marking it in the very centre of the map, Asia, lying to the right of it, and Libya (i.e. Africa), which he placed at the bottom of the map. As far as the boundaries of Europe are concerned, Herodotus set the western boundary as the Pillars of Hercules or the Gibraltar Gate, the southern boundary as the Mediterranean Sea, and the eastern boundary as the Don River and the Sea of Azov (Den Boer, Bugge, and Wover 1995, 15).

Herodotus' map, therefore, shows Europe as one of the three continents that were to be known to the ancient world. Despite this knowledge, the Greeks adopted a division of the world into two parts, Europe and Asia.

The Greeks justified this view by, among other things, identifying and highlighting differences in geographical features. In this context, it is worth mentioning the treatise entitled *The Influences of Atmosphere, Water and Position*. In this connection, Hegel (1967, 95) explains that neither the cold nor the hot zones are habitable, but that Europe's position in the middle of the two extremes is indeed the most habitable. Let us also mention here Le Goff (2006, 18), who much later comes to realise that the European continent is linked by two elements. The first is that of alternating hills and valleys, containing, on the one hand, vast flat areas favourable for cereal cultivation and, on the other, forested areas abundant in wood, honey, game and pigs. Le Goff mentions the sea, which Europeans have always exploited to the full (ibid.).

When it came to finding arguments for dividing the world in two, the Greeks attached great importance to the conflicts they had with the Persians. From these conflicts, which later developed into a war that lasted several years, certain character traits were to emerge, at least according to Hippocrates, on both sides, which were to justify the separate treatment of Europe in relation to Asia. If Hippocrates saw courage and belligerence in the actions of the Greeks, i.e. the Europeans, the Persians, i.e. the Asians, were characterised by wisdom, peace-loving and moderation, which were the best qualities for the establishment of despotism. In other words, Asians were willing to accept slavery in exchange for prosperity and peace, whereas Europeans would always risk their lives for freedom. From this, Le Goff (2006, 19) concludes that it is the behaviour of Europeans that is best suited to the establishment of a democratic form of government.

The Greco-Persian wars also had a profound impact on Aristotle, who attributed the diversity in character traits between Greeks and Persians to the geographical features mentioned above. What is interesting in all this is that Aristotle first placed the Greek capital Athens, located on the Aegean peninsula, in Europe, but did not place the Greeks as a people there. Aristotle's argument for this apparent contradiction was that Europe for him was a distinctly cold land, inhabited by a brave and fearless people who, precisely because of their character, could not be ruled. Aristotle, on the other hand, sees Asia as a too-warm land, which produces a lazy man who is at the mercy of every despot. It is precisely because

of Aristotle's understanding of Europe as a cold land and Asia as a warm land that he could not place the Greek people at either extreme. In terms of character traits, the Greeks were somewhere in between, and this, so Brague (2003, 11) opined, is an essential condition for the establishment of democracy.

3. Christian Europe

The Romans, the self-proclaimed successors of the ancient Greeks, expanded European space a little further. For example, in 1 AD, they conquered Judea and turned it into another Roman province. It is important for us to know that Jesus Christ lived and worked in Judea around that time. His sermons about the coming time of the kingdom of God came to the ears of the Romans. Thinking that Jesus was spreading political propaganda against them, they condemned him as an inciter of the masses and punished him with death on a cross (Brague 2003, 148).

Although the Roman authorities initially rejected the ideas of Christianity and saw it as a political threat, the emergence of the Christian faith on Roman soil was a harbinger of a new era. Already during the reign of Constantine I, who allowed Christians to carry out missions throughout the empire, the religion was gradually gaining ground in the minds of the Roman population. An important milestone in the history of Christianity was the year 380 and the emperor Theodosius, who elevated Christianity above all other religions (Boden 2004, 28, U 2018', 'Hay 1995' 49–52, 'Mastnak 1998', and (see Schmidt 2016, 114)).

After Theodosius' death in 395, the power of the Roman Empire began to decline. It was finally destroyed by the many Germanic tribes that invaded the area from the east. Those who penetrated to the Mediterranean naturally encountered Christianity and immediately adopted it as their own. As Hay (1995, 37–9) explains, Christianity was perceived among the Germanic kings at the time as a ready means of consolidating their power.

In relation to the above, Le Goff (2006) argues that the period between the 5th and 8th centuries, a time of immigration and unification of different peoples, is where we find the beginnings of a European population whose unity was to be based on Christianity and ancient culture. An important source in this respect is the Vita Gertrudis, where it is attested that the late Abbess Gertrude of Niveles was well-known to all the inhabitants of Europe (Le Goff 2006, 35). Mastnak (1998) further mentions another event that also speaks in favour of the existence of a European population, i.e. the 'Gertrude of Niveles'. An anonymous analyst from Cordoba saw the duel between the Franks and the Muslim Saracens as a struggle between Europeans and barbarians.

The Muslim conquests of the Mediterranean in the first half of the 8th century did not cause any panic among the people of the Frankish Empire. Even when the Saracens (a nomadic people from the Arabian Peninsula) invaded the Iberian Peninsula and had already reached the foothills of the Pyrenees, the Franks saw them as a temporary phenomenon that would pass quickly. The Carolingian literati who followed the conquests of the Saracens were very interested in their true origins. They were assumed to be descendants of Abraham, a view that convinced the Carolingian literati, and later Charlemagne, who much preferred to deal with other peoples, such as the Langobards, the Avars, the Saxons, the Danes, the Normans and the Slavs, whose invasions at that time posed much greater risks than the Muslim conquests of the Mediterranean. Pope John VIII, however, had much more to do with the Saracens when these Muslims began to threaten Rome in earnest. This was the first Pope of that time who described the Saracens as a depraved and impure people who needed to be driven out of God's territory, as Mastnak did. He was one of the few who thought like this, especially if we look at some of the chronicles of the time, in which the Saracens were presented as just another barbaric people, or on the same level as the aforementioned Langobards, Avars, Danes, Saxons, Normans and Slavs.

It was not until the 10th century that the Muslim peoples were given a more negative connotation by the Pope (Mastnak 1998, 32–37), when the Saracens began to seriously threaten the Apennine polity.

We have already mentioned how the southern part of Europe was threatened by the Muslim Saracen people in the first half of the 8th century, but of course these were far from the only invasions by a Muslim people in the Mediterranean area. The Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium, also faced this problem. In 1095, Pope Urban II was asked for help in the face of the ongoing siege by the Seljuks, to which he immediately responded, calling for a crusade at the Synod of Clermont in November of that year (Boden 2004, 53). Urban II's speech certainly resonated strongly. It has been written about by many chroniclers, among whom the English chronicler William of Malmesbury deserves special mention, who in his Gesti Regum Anglorum (Hay 1995, 49–52) writes that all Christians, wherever they come from, are brothers whose duty it is to strengthen and extend the frontiers of Christendom by common efforts (Hay 1995, 49–52).

In this sense, the Crusades were, in the eyes of Christians, a clash of 'civilisation' against 'barbarism'. This so-called holy war would not have taken place if, at the end of the 11th century, Muslims had not been perceived as the fundamental enemy or, as Mastnak puts it, as the personification of the religion of the Antichrist (Mastnak 1998, 39–40). For this, the greatest credit is due to Pope Urban II, whose speech really achieved its purpose, as attested by numerous chroniclers (we have mentioned William of Malmesbury). Debeljak (2004) argues that it was Christianity which, in addition to

the ancient legacy mentioned several times, created the first transnationally shaped state after the Roman Empire during the Crusades – not in the strict sense of the word, but in the broadly defined notion of Europe, held together by the clerical elite of the time (Debeljak 2004, 71).

Christianity was, as indicated by Hay (1995, 74–75), the broadest community with which the inhabitants of the European continent identified themselves between the 11th and 13th centuries. With the term Christianity, people laid the common foundation for all people in Western society. Hay adds that to be a Christian at that time was to be a complete human being, as opposed to what he calls the alien beasts. On the other hand, the word Europe was completely sidelined or secondary at that time. It is mentioned in some chronicles, such as Matthieu Paris's Chansons de Geste, which mentions Europe four times in the table of contents, and then there is the Grandes Chroniques de France, in which the chroniclers mention Europe three times – the first time when describing the migrations of the Franks, the second time at the time of the Saracen conquests and the third time when marking the dividing line between the continents. On the other hand, this same chronicle, though compiled in Saint-Denis, mentions Christianity several times, and more lavishly, which, as Hay concludes, in contrast to the notion of Europe, contains an emotional charge, which is reinforced in Christians by the Crusades.

3.1. Colonial conquest or Europeanisation of the world

Until the second half of the 15th century, with a few exceptions, mainly missionaries and merchants, expeditions by Europeans to distant lands were rare. European traders were particularly attracted to the eastern Mediterranean, where they bought spices, which were in great demand among the European population of the time, as they were used in food, dyeing and perfumery. It is important to add that a quarter of the products came from India and China, i.e. from the Far East. As the demand for spices grew, European traders urgently needed to have more frequent and faster contact with the Far East, and to find new territories from which to import gold and other precious metals to meet the growing monetary needs of the European population. The Turkish conquest of the eastern Mediterranean was also an important factor in the search for new routes. Aware of the threat of the Turks, Europeans at the time began to turn away from the Mediterranean, focussing first on the coasts of West Africa and then increasingly towards the Atlantic (Le Goff 2006, 231–232). They were also encouraged to do so by the growing competitiveness, both economically and politically, of the newly formed European nation states seeking new markets. The first of these was Portugal, which, seeking the shortest route to India, first conquered territories on the West African coast and later, when it reached the South American continent, Brazil. Portugal was followed by Spain, which initially concentrated on the West African islands, but when Columbus discovered the Americas, concentrated mainly on the Caribbean islands and areas of Central and South America (Boden 2004, 54). With the rise of Great Britain, the Netherlands, which finally managed to break free from the Spanish grip, and France (Južnic 1980, 28), we have a quintet that we classify as the so-called old colonial powers, the consequences of whose conquests can still be felt today, but more on that later.

Europe, which until then had so strongly defended the Christian values it had adopted from the Romans, had, however, appeared in a very different light outside the European continent at the time of the great conquering campaigns across the Atlantic and in Africa. Driven as they were by material and ideological motives – Le Goff (2006, 233) mentions in this context economic greed, missionary ideas and the ambition to participate in missions of adventure – the European conquistadors, although widely referred to in contemporary times as the "conquistadors of the Americas" (Le Goff 2006, 233), in fact discharged the functions of the "conquistadors of the Atlantic".This does not mean, however, that the European conquerors did not also want to transmit the Christian religion to the peoples they subjugated. This is where the missionaries came into their own, understanding their mission in the sense that it was necessary to turn people away from paganism, to present Christian values as the only true ones, and thus to prepare them psychologically for the future domination of the foreigners (Južnič 1980, 79).

The overseas conquest of new territories would never have happened if it had not been for the strong development of science in Europe at the time, which led to many innovations in a wide range of fields, including, of course, seafaring. The question of why these inventions came about in Europe was addressed by White (1974), who in his article argued that it was mainly due to religion, meaning of course Christianity, which, as opined by White, was supposed to represent a belief in eternal progress; further, according to White (1974, 3-5) European colonialism therefore only reinforced the belief of Europeans themselves in their superiority, and gave the term Europe an important connotation, one of uniqueness (see Schmidt 2016, 114).

4. Political Europe

Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries can by no means be described as a continent of peace because of the constant struggle on the continent, at sea and in distant lands overseas. The constant struggle was exhausting the European monarchies, which was grist for the mill of the Muslim conquests in south-eastern Europe.

In this context, King George of Podjebrady of Bohemia deserves attention, not because of his plan to stop the

Turks and send them back, but in particular because of his proposal to set up an assembly which, although it was not called a European assembly, was more often than not based on a common Christian consciousness. We mention it here because Le Goff (2006, 227–228) describes it as the very first conception of an assembly of a united Europe. This is evidenced by the text originally entitled Universitas (1464), but later translated by the translator Konstantin Gelinek into Tractatus for Europe, which records the words of the Czech King George of Podjebrady when he says that the aim of this so-called 'Assembly of Europe' is to 'unite Europe'. The aim of such an Assembly seeking to safeguard the interests of a united Europe would be to put an end to all wars and to establish peace on the European continent, which, in the event of any disputes between the peoples of Europe, would be settled by a common European tribunal, which George foresaw in the future.

The text goes on to describe how the King of Bohemia also referred to the financing of the Assembly, in particular to cover travel expenses, as the Assembly was to meet in a different European city each time, after the first session in Basel, Switzerland. For the second and third sessions, it was already planned to be hosted first by an Italian city and then by a French city (ibid.).

The seriousness of the matter is shown later in the text, when Jurij Podjebradski mentions the creation of a common coat of arms, seal, archives, treasury, representative of the fiscal commissioner and other officials. At the same time, the Bohemian also had in mind equal representation in the Assembly, in which each nation (it is not described exactly who all George had in mind) would have one vote. The Assembly would otherwise take decisions on the basis of majority voting, with each nation choosing one side or the other. In the event of a tie, the votes of the special envoys of the rulers would prevail. To sum up what has been written about this first-rate idea of the King of Bohemia, it is a remarkable idea, but one for which the time was not right. It was all a bit premature, especially considering that the nations had not yet been formed. Yet in this case, it is a blueprint that bears a surprising number of similarities to today's European Union (ibid.).

In terms of political unification or integration, it is also worth mentioning the French scholar Louis Le Roy, who in 1559, in one of his sermons, urged Christian rulers to stop waging war against each other when the Muslim threat in the form of Turkish invasions was knocking at their door. Europe, as a Christian country, should stand united against the Muslim army. And all Christian rulers should realise that the threat of Muslims, though not necessarily to their territory, is a threat to all of Christendom.

4.1. The value of peace as a unifying element

Comenius also wrote about Europe as a stronghold of Christianity in his Angelus Pacis in 1667, when he exhorted the English and the Dutch to cease their warfare and make peace. The word peace was the second most frequent word, after Christianity, to be found in combination with the term Europe. If until then Christianity had personified Europe and thus equated it with a Christian republic, from the 18th century onwards it was the word peace that pointed to a new reality in the European space, where European peoples would live in peace and harmony with one another.

This was also the time when the term balance of power came to the surface, understood as that state of affairs which alone could prevent further warfare and promote peace on the European continent. Here we should mention De Sully (1559–1641), a minister of King Henry IV of France, and his work Grand Dessein (The Grand Plan), in which he wrote about a grand plan for how Europe would function in the future as one big family. De Sully would achieve this through various divisions, swaps and transfers of territories, so that all European powers would be roughly equally strong and none of them would stand out too much (Mastnak 1998, 76). Henry IV's minister would thus divide Europe into 15 leading states, which he classifies into three groups.

The first group would consist of France, Spain, England, Denmark, Sweden and Lombardy, as representatives of the hereditary monarchies; the second group would consist of the so-called elected monarchies, in which De Sully includes Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Holy Roman Empire and the Papal States; and the last group would include the four republics, the League of Italian Cities, Venice, Switzerland and Belgium. This European confederation would be governed by a European Council, whose main task would be to resolve mutual disputes, prevent conflicts, manage civil and religious affairs, reconcile different interests and compromise, which would in the long term ensure peace, economic development, commercial cooperation and, of course, the consequent rapprochement of European nations (Ješovnik 2000, 76).

If Europe was embodied by Christianity until the colonial conquests, and even afterwards, Europe as a concept increasingly began to take on political contours in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is true that King George of Podjebrady of Bohemia, who, as we have already mentioned, had in mind the creation of a kind of European assembly, had thought of uniting Europe, but De Sully's plan was much more elaborate, as can be seen from the fact that he mentioned in great detail the countries that would participate in a European confederation, and that they were also grouped together. In this context, it is also worth mentioning the French economist

Abbe de Saint-Pierre, who went further than the two above-mentioned economists by presenting his project of Europe as a Union, in which there would no longer be sovereign states; instead, a so-called supreme state (Un etat suprêm) would hold all the powers. It would, among other things, pass all legislation, regulate trade policy and succession issues, and determine the strength of the armed forces. Saint-Pierre was working at a time when Europe was generally seen as a kind of great republic, divided into several different states, but this could not prevent the impression that these states had so much in common; Mastnak (1998) mentions religion, public administration and politics, and that it is possible to speak of Europe as one political system.

4.2. The contribution of enlightened ideas

While Europe was taking on an increasingly political shape, the link with Christianity, on the other hand, began to fray from the 18th century onwards. The reasons for this change can be found above all in the intellectuals of the time, who, influenced by Enlightenment ideas, turned away from traditional patterns of thinking and made much greater use of their reason. They argued that every individual has the right to be autonomous and free and to act in accordance with his or her own reason. This was a time when the belief in progress was replacing the belief in Christianity, which in the following period helped to modernise society, making it more dynamic and efficient. It is this last, efficiency, that intellectuals have criticised the Christian religion for. All this was the basis for the emergence of the modern state, which allows its citizens the right to liberty, to life and to property. In return for these natural rights, citizens had to accept the state power that gave them these rights. In order to avoid too much power being concentrated in one hand, as was the practice in monarchical states, the French philosopher Montesquieu was the first to advocate the division of state power into legislative, executive and judicial branches. All this was happening at a time when Europe was still dominated by powerful ruling dynasties, and thus these ideas of the modern state, which were formulated not only by the aforementioned Montesquieu but also by Rousseau and Locke, as well as Kant, Voltaire and many others, were first realised in the newly created United States of America, which was the first example of human rights being enshrined in its own constitution (Boden 2004, 65–66).

Of course, it was much easier to implement Enlightenment ideas in a country that was being founded anew, rather than in European monarchical countries ruled by dynastic families. They were by no means in disfavour of the new ideas, as they well might have been, but once their rule was abolished, the ruling families would have lost all the power and all the benefits they had enjoyed up until then. It is not surprising that the revolt against such rule began first on French soil, where Enlightenment thought flourished most. The revolutionary period at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries was most exploited by Napoleon Bonaparte, who seized power and, more importantly for the future order of Europe, began to realise his vision of Europe as one nation (Toplak 2003, 71–72), which he saw as one big, rich and happy family, with the same currency and the same principles (Den Boer, Bugge, and Wover 1995, 68), by means of conquest expeditions.

Napoleon and his armies met resistance in European countries from the local populations, who felt the arrogance and tyranny of the newly formed French administrations in the conquered territories. As a result, there was an awakening of national consciousness and an increasingly strong nationalist movement (Toplak 2003, 72), which not only led to Napoleon's defeat against the united armies of European nations but also paved the way for the so-called 'Napoleonic Wars'. The romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, which was at its most violent in 1848, when individual European nations began to loudly spread the idea of national, independent and sovereign states (Šabec 2006, 226), does not mean, however, that the idea of uniting Europe was no longer being considered at that time. On the contrary, the idea of a so-called United States of Europe was still alive, even during the period of the two world wars, as Mastnak argues, writing that even those countries that participated in the First and perpetrated the Second World War contributed their share to today's Europe, which is presented to us in the form of the European Union. He mentions both fascist Italy, which hosted a special scientific meeting in Rome in 1932 to discuss Europe and its historical and spiritual unity, and Nazi Germany, which justified its expansionist ambitions as an effort to (as opined by Mastnak 1998, 84–85) ensure the rebirth of an 'arische' Europe and its emancipation from the perceived threat posed by the so-called forces of Judeo-Bolshevism; such a unified Europe was envisaged as being composed of nations acting according to their own laws of life, interacting with each other and, although internally different, externally acting as a single political entity. Until the end of the First World War, Europe was a leading economic power. After the war, it 'ceded' this role to the United States and Soviet Russia, which became the world's second centre of power. Then came the Second World War, which left Europe with a wrecked economy and infrastructure to remember, along with all the graves. The European continent became a geostrategic area of the US and the Soviet Union, and, like the world, was divided in two. The western part ideologically belonged to the United States, while the eastern part came under the aegis of the Soviet Union (Cabada 2000, 116).

4.3. Towards the European Union

The bipolarity of the European continent was also reflected in its acceptance of different values and norms, dictated

by the USon the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other. In an area that is ideologically oriented towards the West, and which mainly represents the values enshrined in the US Constitution (freedom, respect for human rights, a democratic political system, etc.), Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Germany and France decided to integrate economically in 1959 (EU 2018). We are therefore discussing those countries that are, in a sense, the successors of not only, in the first place, the Frankish Empire, but also of the Holy Roman Empire of the German people; it is further considered that these countries are bound or linked by the fact of their denizens' common identity in Christianity. They are, at the same time, countries that participated both in the colonial conquest of the world from the end of the 15th century onwards and in the imperialism of the late 19th century that led to the two great wars. They are also the countries that founded the European Economic Community (EEC), which was the first step on the long road to rid the western part of Europe of the yoke of the United States, even if it would still largely respect its values and be an ally, but in its own way, and begin to assert its own interests in a multilateral world that would mean the end of the dominance of the Soviet Union and the United States (Petrič 2010, 127).

In the following years, the EEC became increasingly integrated in other areas (free movement of goods, services, people, money, the abolition of internal borders, the common fight against terrorism, etc.) and gradually transformed itself into the European Union. At the same time, it expanded territorially, with a number of new members joining in the following years (EU 2018). However, until the fall of the communist bloc, this supranational organisation did not include any countries that were linked in one way or another to the Soviet Union, even if they were already then 'looking enviously across the wall" and wanted to integrate into it. The United States, in particular, had a strong interest in the integration of the Eastern European countries, since the integration of the former Soviet countries into the European Union would also mean that these countries would adopt the American values that the Western European countries had already adopted. For the countries of Eastern Europe, the integration of their countries into the European Union meant going back to where they belonged. For them, the EU was essentially a symbol of freedom, democracy and economic development (Cabada 2000, 119).

For the countries of Eastern Europe, joining the EU was therefore a symbolic 'return' to the Europe we have come to know so well in this epoch, a Europe as a political formation of nation states based on Christian and democratic values. As such, Europe was never a continent, but always an idea, which the French historian and philosopher Rémi Brague has sensibly divided into three different meanings. We have merely taken his thought one step further and explained Europe as a concept in chronological terms.

The importance of Europe as a political entity, the last to emerge, grew in line with the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, 2010 and 2013, when the Central and Eastern European countries began to become full members of the EU, effectively marking a kind of 'return' to Europe after decades of communist rule.

5. Conclusion

Europe is a concept that we have presented first as a mythological movement of Phoenician origin, then as a geographical space that established itself in the ancient world, and finally as a Christian and democratic entity to which one may or may not belong. In other words, it is an evolving or changing idea that was 'born' on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, nurtured there in the spirit of Christian and democratic values, developed along the Atlantic Ocean, and finally matured into the political entity embodied in the European Union. As regards the latter, this means that countries that are not (yet) members of the EU cannot be considered European. Nevertheless, we can observe that today even those countries that are not EU members (e.g. Ukraine) are giving themselves the term 'European country'. Most often this is because these countries are trying to protect their national interests in the face of other non-EU countries, and the label 'European' is merely used to improve their negotiating position, most often in the form of support for one of the Member States or for the EU as a whole.

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