One of the authors featured in this dialogue, Alexander Semyonov, remarks that the number of his Russian students who express an intuitive sense that Russia is a part of Europe has been decreasing over the past two decades. He provides several ingenious explanations for that fact, primarily pointing to how the existence of the European Union endowed the term “Europe” with a spatial dimension. For those that he queried, it is practically indistinguishable from the Schengen Area. Yet, the factor that seems to exert an even greater influence in this regard is the expansion of Russian nativism, a belief that one’s identity must be ferociously defended against the influence of others. Europe has come to stand for those others.

Imagined community, imagined history?

One need not leave the bounds of the European Union, though, to find similar beliefs being espoused by people, who if not distinguished by their intellect, nevertheless possess real power. ‘We will do whatever has to be done to make you feel confident, as we reach the end of our terms of office, that many things were done during that time,
that election promises were fulfilled, that someone finally thought of the citizen, and not just of his own business, or of some imagined community that means so little to us. The community we need is here, in Poland – one of our own.' President Andrzej Duda drew censure from the liberal media when he made this statement in 2018.¹ Yet, no one moved to withdraw or clarify it, not to mention issue an apology. Of course, the first rule of populism is to never admit to your own mistakes – but this could not have been a misstatement. This was the voice of Polish nativism within the European community. For many, these words evoked a sense of satisfaction.

Did historians have a hand in stripping Europe of its charm? By all means! One sees this clearly when peeking beyond the circle of luminaries and subtle theoretical considerations, toward what used to pass until recently for a local take on European history. Recently, I conducted an experiment of this kind by participating in an attempt to transfer the idea of Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe into Polish and Ukrainian realities. While studying the past few decades of historiographic reflection on the notion of federation, I came face-to-face with a self-referential, teleological history of Poland perceived as a pioneer of European integration in the modern era. Historians referenced the union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, concluded in 1569, Poland's role as a nineteenth-century champion of a Europe of peoples rather than tyrants, and, finally, as a member of the European Union it had joined in spirit ages ago.²

In this recently dominant interpretation, the European community overlaid the traditional vision of national history. Within it, modern statehood is an early embodiment of the Union. National uprisings express a struggle against the Russian empire based on the notion of a federation of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. Here, one finds the linguistically revolutionary combination of the noun “federation” and the preposition “against”: the purpose of the federation is not to ensure equality among its members, but to provide support to Poland in its struggle against Moscow. After all, the “end of history” amounted to the fulfilment of the slogan 'From the Union of Lublin to the Union of Europe,' so dear to the heart of the Polish Pope, John Paul II.

This peculiar example illustrates how the disappointment with the previous attempts to formulate a history of Europe appears on many levels, even in the apparently sanitised, anational conditions of the European idea. In fact, it is far from the opposite of the traditional national narrative that the preachers of European history took it for.³ It can actually coexist in a symbiosis with this narrative, taking on the worst of its sins, parochialism and teleologism, perhaps along with some of its virtues. Rather than providing a new means of fashioning historical narratives, it is the object of one. Already somewhat compromised and detested, as boring things tend to be, European history remains a postulate.
A European history or history in Europe?

One major source of frustration in this context is the surprising level of concordance among scholars concerning the best remedy – namely, transnational history or some particular narrow or broad variation thereof, which is exactly what new imperial history, translocal history, or global history are. The designated tools for achieving European history are comparative approaches and histoire croisée; its field of operation comprises both large structures and individual societies. The problem is that, while much time was expended on theoretical approaches to potential directions of development and conceptual analyses, practical applications of a transnational history remain few and far between.

This is hardly surprising. The examples that come to my mind are striking primarily because of the exceptional competency of the authors, fluent in many languages and varied historiographic traditions. Such is the case with Jan Surman, historian of science, whose outstanding history of Habsburg universities seems like a case study of processes described in Pieter Judson's famous book, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. I shall return to Surman's findings since the history of science in the Habsburg empire can tell us a lot about modernity. A similar recent example of transnational history put to good use, additionally enhanced with catchy writing and rewarded with commercial success, is Philipp Ther's history of systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Then, there is the instance of transnational history that most resembles a classical comparative approach – a synthesis of federalist projects in Central and Eastern Europe by Gennadii Korolov.

What seems to typify these practical applications of the beautiful idea of a European history is mostly a tendency to contravene established thought patterns. Philipp Ther includes Germany in the history of post-communist transformation to better observe one obvious fact, though only made obvious when directly indicated: The problems with integrating the former GDR would have been foreseeable if the Czechoslovak, Polish, and Hungarian experiences after 1989, but also immediately before the collapse of “real socialism” were heeded with greater conviction. Korolov, in turn, writes a history of the federalist idea that is not limited to a single empire, but rather travels across Europe, significantly including Russia – a rather rare occurrence. Finally, Surman shows how the gradual nationalisation of Austro-Hungarian universities in the second half of the nineteenth century (amounting in practice to the abandonment of German as the language of instruction and a partial staff replacement) did not, in fact, affect their international stature. In addition, the rapid increase in scientific publications in national
languages did not have an adverse impact on their global reception. The model of a university imperial in form, but national in content, producing publications in the languages of the provinces, as well as in German and French, proved strikingly efficient and attractive. It was precisely the Habsburg system and university staff that dominated the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe in the inter-war period, following the collapse of the empire.

In each of these cases, barriers in our thinking about Europe were breached. This was achieved even though, or perhaps because, none of the authors was guided by a particularly broad ambition. It seems to me that this is precisely where the challenge lies for the new history of Europe. The challenge consists of a gradual, local expansion of the horizon, achieved by historians who tackle particular topics. In spite of the radical, postmodernist interpretations, history is still something of a cumulative science, even if much of what it deals in is new discoveries. Yet, what accumulates are not only facts, but also habits of thought. Scientific revolutions do not spring up from bare ground. A transnational history of Europe will thus only emerge out of transnational studies of all social, cultural, and political phenomena that constitute Europe. To my mind, the spatial aspect of these “minor” European histories is relatively insignificant. If telling them requires branching out onto the global stage, all the better. If this or that region has to be skipped, so be it. What we might gain in return will be no less European for it.

It is not incidental that perhaps the most impressive recent example of a thoroughly transnational European history appeared within the field of history of ideas. Ideas do not require any infrastructure. They travel light and fast, making it harder to fit them into rigid hierarchies. I believe that it is not incidental that the study in question concerns a part of the continent where historiographic traditions have not yet laid down deep roots and none exerts dominance over the others. This synthetic history of political thought in the east of Europe is the work of a group of historians that includes no narrow specialist in their “home” country, region, or language. The two volumes of *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe* clearly bear that out. None of the minor and major parts that comprise it focusses on any single state or nation. The plot constantly shifts from one location to another, rarely staying in one country for more than a few paragraphs. Guided by the incontrovertible assumption that nations inhabiting the same region and facing similar problems will share broadly the same ideas, it is on these ideas that the authors focus.

This approach almost always gives rise to surprising correlations, more forceful here, in a synthetic work, than is the case in studies by Korolov or Surman. Certain phenomena are viewed in unusual contexts. Among the more customary comparisons in secondary sources are the comparative analyses of “national awakenings” of the first half of the
nineteenth century, or of the formation of modern political movements. Readers accustomed to any of the local canons of history of political thought will be surprised by the broad, inclusive definition of late Enlightenment, far more expansive than earlier history textbooks would assume. One crucial corrective to this comparative paradigm is the incorporation of temporal shifts within specific formations of thought in various countries and cultures. The fundamental assumption of the book is that political thought in Central and Eastern Europe developed diachronically. Ideological formations followed largely the same progression, but often at a greater or smaller time remove, for example, in broad terms, earlier in Hungary than in Albania. Cognizant of this fact, the authors adapt their story, for instance, by abandoning a classic chronological approach. This manner of ordering a vast array of material is justified and yields the desired results. It facilitates the understanding of ideas and attitudes of the actors of political life described in the book. Only rarely does it descend into an annoying mannerism, with the authors seeming to expect that every major and repeatable political phenomenon must be replicated in every, or at least every major, country. Even in those cases, though, they steer clear of the irritating manner of “European” syntheses. The paradigm they apply to history is not drawn from any dominant narrative, but is rather the result of a negotiation between numerous national and non-national perspectives.

Desperate times call for desperate measures

A useful parallel could be drawn between the struggle over European history and the history of gender. The doyenne of the latter current, the distinguished historian Karin Hausen, states that its purpose is not to promote the formation of separate departments or research areas, which is what we have witnessed, but to make the aspect of cultural and biological sex vital for any kind of history. One does well to quote her extensively:

'I think it is urgent to ask much more critically than before what the fiction of a unity of history, which is so effective in historical scholarship, has achieved and is still able to achieve, or what it has obscured and should no longer obscure in the future. It is time to discuss these questions much more openly and offensively than before. I propose that instead of the previous unity, the multiplicity of history should be developed as a well thought-out historiographical programme. Accepting the non-unity of history and shaping it productively in scholarship means visualising the many stories of local as well as global processes of historical change precisely for the sake of their contradictions, for the sake of their differences. Not only the heterogeneity of times and spaces, but also the marked differences between young and old people, women and men, according to
their origins and life situations, together with the plurality of possibilities and interests of the subjects acting and creating meaning in the historical course of time, must be made the centre of scientifically sound historical representation much more decisively than before. This programme challenges us to take a greater critical distance from the tried and tested auxiliary construction of collective subjects and to say goodbye to the master narrative.'

The same applies to a transnational, translocal, or transregional perspective. In each case, it takes time and adequate support for research before they can become an set of incontrovertible facts. What can we do to increase the pace of this process? By developing an empirical transnational, translocal, transregional, or any other history whose definition is not based in a narrowing of the scope of research. By having the courage to cut across established interpretations. As an historian dealing primarily with Central and Eastern Europe, I am anxiously awaiting the “balkanisation” of the history of Western Europe, no less culturally or ethnically diverse than the proverbial Balkan cauldron. In all these activities, the ever-dominant national narratives are not an obstacle, but a point of departure. To expand them, correct them, or dispute them, one must first know them. Hence the utmost caution with which I approach the notion (and, as I had the opportunity to learn, and also to practice) of funding historical research in support of international cooperation at the expense of cohesiveness and historiographic value. It seems to me that these expectations for grand narratives must be kept in check, and funding should initially be directed toward projects of limited impact. Only with this research in place can one think of grand narratives, free from the desire to please everyone. Rather I hope for a broad response and a lively, perhaps even fiery, discussion, similar to that which passed through the European press after the opening of the House of European History in Brussels.

Furthermore, I believe that the practice of European history should be labelled as a high risk profession. As much can be gleaned from the failure of the shallow, top-down history of integration, as from the Polish version, which mashes it with the history of federal ideas and seasons it with anti-Russian sentiment. I would not go as far as to cry “ad fontes!” Rather, I believe that practice shows that an officially declared European perspective tends to hinder rather than help the struggle against dominant narratives, given how tempting it is to just fashion a new variation of the same narrative. Meanwhile, however anyone feels about European history, it should not come into this world with ready-made interpretations, but rather meekly bow its head before the Nicht-Einheit der Geschichte.


3. This view is propounded with conviction in: Krzysztof Pomian, Europa i jej narody, Gdańsk 2009.


6. Philipp Ther, Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent: Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa, Berlin 2014 (the book has been translated into numerous languages).

7. Геннадий Корольов, Федеративні проекти в Центрально-східній Європі від ідеологічної утопії до реальної політики (1815-1921 рр.), Київ 2019.
