

**Recibido:** 2026-01-24

**Aceptado:** 2026-02-02

**Publicado:** 2026-02-26

## **The Role of the Czech Republic in Redefining Central European Identity within the European Union**

### **El papel de la República Checa en la redefinición de la identidad centroeuropa dentro de la Unión Europea**

**Autor**

**Dr. Mohsen Zamani<sup>1</sup>**

PhD in Political Geography (Political Organization of Space)

[zamani\\_m@ut.ac.ir](mailto:zamani_m@ut.ac.ir)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6210-2305>

**University of Tehran**

Tehran, Iran



## Abstract

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system, Central Europe re-emerged as a key arena for redefining identity within Europe. States formerly categorized as part of the Eastern Bloc had to reassess their positions after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the enlargement of the European Union. In this context, the Czech Republic has played a distinctive role in reshaping the meaning of Central Europe from within the EU. This article examines how it has contributed to redefining Central European identity through political engagement, institutional participation, and normative positioning.

The study asks how, and through which mechanisms, the Czech Republic has influenced this redefinition and what consequences this has had for unity and division within the EU. It argues that the Czech Republic has adopted a pragmatic and balanced approach. Rather than opposing Western Europe or accepting an Eastern label, Czech policymakers promote a layered understanding of identity rooted in historical experience and national sovereignty, while remaining selectively engaged in European integration.

Grounded in constructivist international relations theory, the study views identity as socially constructed through interaction with institutions and discourse. The Czech Republic is seen not merely as adapting to EU norms, but as shaping the meaning of Central Europe. Using qualitative analysis of EU documents, government strategies, and elite speeches, the research identifies three levels of influence: historical reinterpretation distancing the region from the Eastern Europe label; active but critical EU participation; and moderated regional cooperation, especially within the Visegrad framework.

Overall, the Czech Republic advances a flexible, pluralistic model of Central European identity compatible with a multi-centered European Union.

**Keywords:** Czech Republic; Central Europe; Regional Identity; European Union; Constructivism; Identity Politics



## Resumen

Tras el fin de la Guerra Fría y el colapso del sistema bipolar, Europa Central volvió a emerger como un escenario clave para la redefinición de la identidad dentro de Europa. Los Estados anteriormente clasificados como parte del Bloque del Este tuvieron que replantear sus posiciones tras la disolución de la Unión Soviética y la ampliación de la Unión Europea. En este contexto, la República Checa ha desempeñado un papel distintivo en la reconfiguración del significado de Europa Central desde el interior de la UE. Este artículo examina cómo ha contribuido a redefinir la identidad centroeuropea mediante el compromiso político, la participación institucional y el posicionamiento normativo.

El estudio plantea cómo, y a través de qué mecanismos, la República Checa ha influido en esta redefinición y qué consecuencias ha tenido para la unidad y la división dentro de la UE. Se sostiene que la República Checa ha adoptado un enfoque pragmático y equilibrado. En lugar de oponerse a Europa Occidental o aceptar una etiqueta oriental, los responsables políticos checos promueven una comprensión estratificada de la identidad, arraigada en la experiencia histórica y la soberanía nacional, manteniendo al mismo tiempo un compromiso selectivo con la integración europea.

Basado en la teoría constructivista de las relaciones internacionales, el estudio concibe la identidad como una construcción social moldeada a través de la interacción con instituciones y discursos. La República Checa es entendida no solo como un actor que se adapta a las normas de la UE, sino como un agente que contribuye a configurar el significado de Europa Central. Mediante un análisis cualitativo de documentos de la UE, estrategias gubernamentales y discursos de élites políticas, la investigación identifica tres niveles de influencia: la reinterpretación histórica que distancia a la región de la etiqueta de Europa del Este; una participación activa pero crítica en la UE; y una cooperación regional moderada, especialmente en el marco de Visegrado.

En conjunto, la República Checa promueve un modelo flexible y pluralista de identidad centroeuropea, compatible con una Unión Europea de carácter multicéntrico.

**Palabras clave:** República Checa; Europa Central; Identidad regional; Unión Europea; Constructivismo; Política identitarian



## Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar international system fundamentally reshaped Europe's political, institutional, and ideological landscape. Beyond shifts in power and security arrangements, this transformation set in motion deep processes of identity redefinition across the continent. Central Europe, in particular, re-emerged as a crucial space for debates about belonging, historical continuity, and political orientation. Countries once broadly labeled as part of "Eastern Europe" during the Cold War increasingly sought to reconstruct their identities and reposition themselves within the new European order shaped by the European Union (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Zielonka, 2006). Among these countries, the Czech Republic has played a particularly significant role in redefining Central European identity within the institutional and normative framework of the EU.

Central European identity has long been marked by ambiguity, contestation, and hybridity. It is not simply a geographical designation, but a historically and culturally constructed space shaped by shared experiences of empire, shifting borders, political subjugation, and contested sovereignty (Kundera, 1984; Rupnik, 2007). The legacy of the Habsburg Empire, the trauma of the Second World War, and subsequent incorporation into the Soviet sphere created a sense of historical discontinuity that deeply influenced regional self-perceptions. After the collapse of communist regimes in 1989, Central European countries sought not only political and economic integration with Western Europe but also symbolic reintegration into what they viewed as their rightful place in European civilization (Havel, 1992).

The Czech Republic has been at the forefront of this symbolic and political reintegration. Czech political discourse consistently emphasizes the country's historical, cultural, and intellectual ties to Western Europe, portraying the communist era as a temporary rupture rather than a defining feature of national or regional identity (Innes, 2001). This narrative has helped challenge the homogenizing label of "Eastern Europe" and revive the idea of Central Europe as a distinct and legitimate component of European identity. In this sense, the Czech Republic has not simply received European norms but actively shaped the meaning and boundaries of Central European identity within the EU.



The European Union's enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 was a pivotal moment in this identity transformation. EU membership offered Central European countries institutional recognition, political legitimacy, and a voice in European decision-making. Yet it also revealed ongoing tensions between national sovereignty and supranational governance, as well as between diverse historical experiences and a shared European normative framework (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). For the Czech Republic, EU accession represented both the culmination of a long-term strategy of "return to Europe" and the beginning of a more nuanced relationship with European integration, characterized by selective engagement and cautious skepticism toward deeper political centralization (Hanley, 2012).

In this context, the Czech Republic has helped redefine Central European identity by promoting a pragmatic and flexible understanding of regional belonging. Instead of positioning Central Europe in opposition to Western Europe, Czech policymakers have framed the region as an integral yet distinct part of the European project, valuing democratic governance, market integration, and the rule of law, while remaining attentive to national sovereignty and historical diversity (Risse, 2010). This approach allows the Czech Republic to articulate a Central European identity compatible with EU membership but resistant to uniformity and excessive normative convergence.

The Czech Republic's engagement in regional cooperation frameworks, especially the Visegrad Group, has further shaped Central European identity within the EU. While the Visegrad Group is often associated with resistance to certain EU policies, particularly in migration and social governance, the Czech Republic has generally taken a more moderate, less confrontational stance than some of its partners (Dangerfield, 2018). This positioning enables the Czech Republic to act as a mediator, balancing regional solidarity with constructive engagement in the EU, and reinforcing a Central European identity that is neither marginal nor overtly antagonistic.

From a theoretical perspective, constructivist approaches in international relations provide a useful lens to understand these dynamics. Constructivism emphasizes that identities are socially constructed through interaction, discourse, and institutional practice, rather than being fixed or predetermined (Wendt, 1999). Applied to the European context, this perspective highlights how EU membership both constrains and enables identity formation, allowing member states to



reinterpret historical narratives and redefine regional roles (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). The Czech Republic's engagement with the EU illustrates how Central European identity has been continuously negotiated and reshaped through participation in European institutions, policy debates, and normative discourse.

Despite the growing literature on European integration and post-communist transformation, the role of individual Central European countries in shaping regional identity within the EU remains underexplored. Much existing research treats Central Europe as a homogeneous bloc or focuses mainly on conflict between the EU and certain member states (Vachudova, 2005). This article addresses this gap by examining the Czech Republic as a case study of identity agency, highlighting how its political discourse, foreign policy orientations, and institutional behavior have helped redefine Central European identity within the European Union.

The central aim of this article is to analyze how the Czech Republic has contributed to the reconstruction and rearticulation of Central European identity within the EU and to consider the broader implications of this process for European integration. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on regional identity, differentiated integration, and the future of a pluralistic, multi-centered Europe.

## Research Methodology

This article takes a qualitative approach, drawing on a constructivist perspective in international relations. It gathers data by analyzing official European Union texts, Czech foreign policy documents, strategic statements, and speeches by political leaders. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the study explores how these narratives and practices help shape and redefine Central European identity within the EU.

## Theoretical Framework

Understanding the role of the Czech Republic in reshaping Central European identity within the European Union requires a theoretical approach capable of addressing identity, discourse, institutions, and historical context simultaneously. Approaches that focus solely on material



power, economic interests, or cost–benefit calculations cannot fully explain how identities are constructed and negotiated in Europe. Constructivism, with its emphasis on ideas, norms, identities, and shared meanings, provides a strong foundation for analyzing how Central European identity is formed and redefined, and how the Czech Republic participates in this process. In addition, theories of European integration and new regionalism offer complementary perspectives that situate these dynamics within broader institutional and regional contexts.

### **Constructivism and Identity in International Relations**

Constructivism emerged as a response to dominant realist and liberal theories, emphasizing that international politics is socially constructed through interaction and shared meanings rather than being fixed. Unlike realism, which treats state identities and interests as given, constructivism sees identities as flexible, formed, and transformed through engagement with other actors and institutional frameworks (Wendt, 1999).

Alexander Wendt’s well-known idea that “anarchy is what states make of it” illustrates that even the fundamental structures of the international system are not inherently fixed and can change depending on shared norms and expectations (Wendt, 1992). This insight is particularly relevant to the European Union, which functions not only as an institutional arrangement but also as a normative and identity-based space where concepts like “Europe,” “Central Europe,” and “membership” are continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

Within constructivist theory, identity operates at multiple levels—national, regional, and supranational—which interact and shape one another. This allows states to carry layered identities that become more or less salient depending on the context. Central European countries navigate between national identity, regional identity, and a broader European identity, with the Czech Republic serving as a key example of balancing EU membership with regional distinctiveness (Risse, 2010).

### **Central Europe as a Discursive and Historical Construct**

Central Europe is less a fixed geographic space and more a historically and discursively constructed concept. Its boundaries and meanings have shifted over time, shaped by changing political and ideological contexts (Rupnik, 2007). During the Cold War, Central Europe was



largely subsumed under the label “Eastern Europe,” a categorization with strong ideological and normative implications, positioning the region as Europe’s “other” (Kundera, 1984).

From a constructivist perspective, such labels are powerful discursive acts that shape identity hierarchies. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc opened a space in which Central European countries, including the Czech Republic, sought to articulate alternative narratives emphasizing historical, cultural, and political ties to Western Europe. This process represents a selective reinterpretation of the past, present, and future of Europe to construct a renewed regional identity.

Collective memory and historical narratives play a central role in this process. Shared interpretations of the past influence expectations and behavior in the present (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). In Czech political discourse, references to the Habsburg legacy, interwar democracy, and dissident traditions during communism reinforce the country’s self-image as an integral part of Europe. By framing communism as a temporary rupture rather than a defining identity marker, Czech narratives strengthen a Central European identity aligned with European norms of democracy and liberalism (Innes, 2001).

### **European Integration and the Identity Dimension**

Classical European integration theories, such as neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, often emphasize material interests, functional spillovers, and intergovernmental negotiation (Haas, 1958; Moravcsik, 1998). While valuable for certain aspects of integration, these approaches offer limited insight into identity formation and shared meanings.

Constructivist approaches, on the other hand, highlight the EU as a normative and identity-shaping polity. Membership socializes states into shared norms, values, and practices, gradually reshaping self-understanding and perceptions of others (Risse, 2010). The Czech Republic’s experience illustrates how integration can reinforce a European identity while encouraging distinct regional identities.

The EU’s enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s was a critical moment for redefining Europe’s identity boundaries. Enlargement was not only strategic or economic; it was also symbolic, signaling inclusion and redefining what it means to be European (Schimmelfennig



& Sedelmeier, 2005). For the Czech Republic, accession institutionalized its European belonging while creating ongoing tensions between national, regional, and supranational identities.

### **New Regionalism and Central European Cooperation**

New regionalism emphasizes that regions are socially constructed through political interaction, institutional cooperation, and shared narratives, rather than determined solely by geography (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Central Europe emerges as a political and identity project shaped by initiatives such as the Visegrad Group.

The Czech Republic's participation in the Visegrad Group strengthens Central Europe's representation within the EU. However, regional cooperation does not automatically produce a unified identity. Central European identity remains contested, shaped by divergent national narratives and policy preferences (Dangerfield, 2018). Compared to some regional partners, the Czech Republic often takes a pragmatic and moderate approach, mediating between regional solidarity and EU integration. This demonstrates that regional identity can complement, rather than conflict with, broader European identity.

### **Identity, Norms, and Power**

Constructivism also highlights the relationship between identity, norms, and power. Unlike traditional notions of power, which focus on military or economic capabilities, constructivist theory emphasizes the ability to shape norms, meanings, and frameworks of interpretation (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). The Czech Republic exercises influence by actively participating in normative debates within the EU, shaping perceptions of Central Europe and its role in Europe.

This perspective is particularly relevant in debates on the EU's future, including differentiated integration and multi-speed Europe. As the Union becomes increasingly diverse, regional identities like Central Europe play a growing role. The Czech Republic's articulation of a flexible and pluralistic Central European identity exemplifies the exercise of normative power at both regional and supranational levels.

### **Research Findings**



The findings of this study are derived from a qualitative analysis of official European Union documents, Czech foreign policy texts, speeches and statements of political elites, and analytical literature related to Central Europe. The data were analyzed using a discourse-oriented approach, grounded in the constructivist theoretical framework, revealing that the Czech Republic plays an active, multi-layered, and mediating role in redefining Central European identity within the European Union. This role is not expressed as a direct confrontation with the European project but as a reinterpretation of “Central Europe” as a distinct yet integral part of Europe (Kazharski, 2022; ter Laak, 2025).

The first finding indicates that the official and elite discourse of the Czech Republic continuously seeks to distance Central Europe from the Cold War narrative of being part of “Eastern Europe.” In Czech foreign policy documents and official statements, Central Europe is represented not as a peripheral or transitional region, but as a historical and cultural part of European civilization. This discourse emphasizes historical ties with Western Europe, interwar democratic experience, and European intellectual heritage, aiming to elevate the symbolic status of the region within the EU’s identity framework (Rupnik, 2007; Innes, 2001). This discursive redefinition exemplifies what constructivists call “meaning-making power,” the ability of an actor to influence interpretive frameworks (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Through selective historical reinterpretation, the Czech Republic actively contributes to shaping European understanding of Central Europe.

The second finding demonstrates that, unlike some regional approaches that define Central European identity in opposition to the EU, the dominant Czech discourse emphasizes complementarity between the two identity levels. Central Europe is not the “Other” of Europe, but an internal layer of European identity. This approach aligns with the constructivist notion of multi-layered identity, which allows national, regional, and supranational identities to coexist (Risse, 2010). Analysis of Czech positions within EU institutions shows that the country often uses language of “reform from within” and advocates strengthening diversity within European unity. This strategy enables the Czech Republic to maintain its commitment to the European project while representing the historical and political sensitivities of Central Europe.

The third finding highlights the Czech Republic’s mediating role among Central European countries. Within regional cooperation frameworks, particularly the Visegrad Group, the Czech



Republic often adopts a more balanced and less confrontational stance toward the EU. It seeks to bridge gaps between critical positions of some regional partners and the institutional requirements of the EU (Dangerfield, 2018). This mediating role can be conceptualized as a form of “identity brokerage,” where the Czech Republic aims to present a flexible and responsible image of Central Europe. The findings indicate that this approach enhances the legitimacy of Central Europe within the EU and prevents its reduction to a purely oppositional bloc.

The fourth finding emphasizes the significance of normative socialization within the EU framework. The Czech Republic’s active participation in EU institutions, committees, and decision-making processes fosters internalization of European norms and reproduction of European identity among political elites. This process is consistent with constructivist literature highlighting the role of institutions in shaping actors’ identities (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). Simultaneously, this socialization is not one-sided. The Czech Republic leverages this institutional space to convey Central European concerns and narratives to the European level, thereby contributing to the redefinition of European normative content (ter Laak, 2025).

The fifth finding indicates that historical memory plays a central role in Czech identity politics. Experiences of occupation, communism, and democratic transition serve as key elements in national narratives and in representing the Czech Republic’s position in Europe. These narratives emphasize the country’s “natural European-ness” and present communism as a historical deviation (Kundera, 1984). Such representations redefine not only national but also regional identity, portraying Central Europe as part of Europe’s shared historical experience. The findings suggest that this memory politics strengthens symbolic ties between Central Europe and the EU.

The sixth finding addresses the persistent tensions between emphasis on national sovereignty and commitment to European integration. In Czech political discourse, these tensions often manifest in rhetoric supporting a “Europe of Nations” and opposing excessive centralization in Brussels. However, the findings show that this stance does not negate European identity but contributes to a specific interpretation of it (Moravcsik, 1998). Within this framework, the Czech Republic promotes a model of integration in which historical and cultural diversity of Central Europe is acknowledged. This approach is part of the ongoing redefinition of Central European identity within the EU.



The seventh finding indicates that EU enlargement to the East has had profound institutional, economic, and identity-related consequences for Central Europe. The Czech Republic's EU membership institutionalized its European identity while simultaneously intensifying the need to redefine regional distinctiveness (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). This duality manifests as an effort to present Central Europe as “another Europe,” but not as a “Europe outside.” The findings suggest that the Czech Republic has played an active and guiding role in this identity process (Kazharski, 2022).

The final finding shows that the Czech Republic's role in redefining Central European identity is not limited to the past or present but is connected to forward-looking debates about the EU's future. In discussions regarding multi-speed integration, institutional reforms, and crisis management, the Czech Republic supports approaches that consider identity diversity as a source of resilience for the EU (Risse, 2010; (Re)Constructing Europe, 2025).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that through discursive, institutional, and normative actions, the Czech Republic has played a key role in redefining Central European identity. This role is based on reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaning rather than confrontation, positioning Central Europe as a distinct yet fully integrated part of Europe.

## Results and Discussion

The findings of this study show that the Czech Republic plays an active and multifaceted role in redefining Central European identity within the European Union. Through a mix of discursive, institutional, and normative strategies, the Czech Republic has helped shape a vision of Central Europe that is both distinct and an integral part of Europe, moving away from Cold War-era labels that depicted the region as peripheral or merely “Eastern.” The Czech narrative emphasizes historical and cultural ties with Western Europe, interwar democratic experiences, and a shared European intellectual heritage, reflecting a deliberate effort to reposition Central Europe in European consciousness. This discursive approach illustrates what constructivist scholars describe as “meaning-making power,” demonstrating the Czech Republic's capacity to



influence interpretive frameworks at both regional and EU levels, highlighting its role in shaping not only regional identity but broader European narratives as well.

Unlike approaches that treat Central European identity as oppositional to the EU, the Czech discourse frames it as complementary, creating a layered identity where national, regional, and European elements coexist. This is especially evident in the Czech Republic's engagement within EU institutions and decision-making processes, where the country often advocates for reform from within, promoting diversity and recognition of historical and cultural specificities while remaining committed to the European project. This strategy reflects a nuanced balancing act, aligning national interests with regional solidarity and supranational integration, and emphasizing the interdependence between national and European identities.

The Czech Republic also serves as a mediator among Central European states, particularly within the Visegrad Group, often adopting balanced positions that reconcile regional priorities with EU expectations. This mediating role reinforces the legitimacy of Central Europe within the EU and positions the Czech Republic as an "identity broker," facilitating dialogue and consensus-building between countries with varying degrees of EU skepticism and institutional participation. By presenting a flexible and responsible vision of Central Europe, the Czech Republic actively shapes regional dynamics and EU policy debates, demonstrating that Central European identity and European identity can coexist without contradiction.

Normative socialization within the EU plays a crucial role in reinforcing this identity. Through participation in committees, institutions, and policy networks, Czech elites internalize European norms while simultaneously promoting the specific concerns and narratives of Central Europe, contributing to the ongoing evolution of European identity itself. This reciprocal process shows that identity formation is not one-directional; rather, the Czech Republic actively negotiates and reinterprets norms to assert its regional perspective while aligning with broader European values. Historical memory is central to this process, with narratives of occupation, communism, and democratic transition mobilized to affirm the Czech Republic's European legitimacy and the continuity of Central European civilization. By framing communism as a historical rupture rather than a defining identity, these narratives strengthen both national and regional claims to European belonging, illustrating the interplay between history and contemporary identity politics.



Tensions between national sovereignty and European integration are visible in Czech discourse, particularly in rhetoric emphasizing a “Europe of Nations” and cautioning against excessive centralization in Brussels. Yet these tensions do not undermine European identity; instead, they provide a distinct interpretive lens through which integration is understood. The Czech approach seeks to preserve national autonomy while actively engaging in EU processes, suggesting that integration and sovereignty can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. This nuanced stance contributes to a pluralistic understanding of both Central European and European identity, recognizing diversity as a source of resilience for the EU.

The EU’s enlargement to include Central and Eastern European countries, including the Czech Republic, has significant implications for identity formation. Membership institutionalizes European identity for the Czech Republic while emphasizing the importance of maintaining and articulating regional distinctiveness. The findings suggest that the Czech Republic actively defines the boundaries and characteristics of Central Europe within the EU framework, portraying the region as “another Europe” rather than as an external or marginalized space. This dual perspective highlights the Czech Republic’s agency in negotiating a regional identity that complements broader European integration.

Looking ahead, the Czech Republic continues to engage in discussions on the EU’s future, including multi-speed integration, institutional reform, and crisis management. In these debates, the Czech perspective highlights the value of identity diversity as a resource for European cohesion and resilience. This forward-looking engagement shows that the Czech Republic’s role in redefining Central European identity is not only historically grounded but also oriented toward shaping the evolution of the European project. By combining discursive framing, historical memory, and normative engagement, the Czech Republic positions Central Europe as a dynamic, pluralistic, and integral part of Europe, capable of contributing to the EU’s adaptability and sustainability.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the Czech Republic’s influence on Central European identity is multifaceted, encompassing historical reinterpretation, institutional engagement, normative socialization, and mediating roles within the region.



## Conclusion

The analysis of the Czech Republic's role in redefining Central European identity within the European Union reveals a rich and multi-layered dynamic that spans historical, cultural, institutional, and normative dimensions. Over the course of its engagement with the EU, the Czech Republic has strategically positioned itself as an active agent shaping both the perception and reality of Central Europe. It emphasizes the region's historical continuity, cultural distinctiveness, and its integral connection to European civilization. In doing so, the country moves beyond Cold War-era labels that relegated Central Europe to the margins, promoting a more nuanced understanding of the region as a core component of Europe's political, cultural, and normative landscape.

Throughout its EU membership and broader diplomatic activities, the Czech Republic has engaged in a process of discursive construction, reshaping the narratives surrounding Central Europe. By highlighting historical experiences such as interwar democratic traditions, resistance to authoritarianism, and contributions to European intellectual and cultural life, the Czech discourse fosters a sense of continuity and legitimacy for the region. This process not only strengthens Central Europe's symbolic status but also reinforces the Czech Republic's role in negotiating the meanings and interpretations of European identity. The interplay between historical memory and contemporary policy-making shows that identity is not static; rather, it is a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon shaped through ongoing engagement with both regional and supranational actors.

The study also highlights the layered nature of identity, where national, regional, and European elements coexist and interact. Rather than framing Central European identity as opposed to European identity, the Czech approach treats it as complementary. This allows for the simultaneous expression of national distinctiveness and European belonging. By advocating for reform from within the EU and promoting recognition of the region's unique characteristics, the Czech Republic demonstrates how diversity can serve as a source of resilience and cohesion across the Union.



In its role as a mediator among Central European countries, the Czech Republic helps stabilize and coordinate regional positions within the EU. Through initiatives like the Visegrad Group, it often acts as a bridge between countries with differing levels of EU skepticism and institutional engagement, facilitating dialogue and consensus-building. This mediating function underscores the importance of interpretive and normative influence, showing that power in Europe is not only about economic or military strength but also about shaping meanings, norms, and narratives. By presenting Central Europe as flexible, responsible, and integral to the European project, the Czech Republic enhances both regional legitimacy and its own strategic standing.

Normative socialization within EU structures is another key dimension through which the Czech Republic reinforces its role. Participation in institutions, committees, and policy networks allows Czech elites to internalize European norms while simultaneously promoting regional perspectives in EU discourse. This two-way process demonstrates that identity formation is interactive: the Czech Republic actively negotiates, reinterprets, and contributes to the evolution of European norms and values. By doing so, it ensures that Central European voices are heard and recognized within supranational frameworks.

Historical memory remains central to shaping both national and regional identity. By emphasizing experiences of occupation, authoritarianism, and democratic transition, the Czech Republic highlights the continuity of Central European civilization and its alignment with European democratic values. By framing past adversities as temporary disruptions rather than defining characteristics, the Czech narrative situates both the Czech Republic and the broader region firmly within European identity. This strategic use of history not only strengthens legitimacy and belonging but also helps balance historical particularities with contemporary imperatives for European unity.

The Czech Republic also demonstrates skill in navigating tensions between national sovereignty and European integration. While emphasizing a “Europe of Nations” and cautioning against excessive centralization, it does not undermine European identity. Instead, it creates a nuanced understanding of integration in which national autonomy, historical specificity, and regional distinctiveness coexist harmoniously with EU-wide objectives. This approach shows how the



Czech Republic can influence both the conceptual and practical dimensions of European integration, ensuring that Central Europe's identity is neither marginalized nor homogenized.

EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe has further reinforced the importance of identity in the Czech Republic's European engagement. Membership has institutionalized European identity while highlighting the need for a distinct regional voice. The Czech Republic has actively shaped discourse on Central Europe's role within the EU, portraying the region as an essential, dynamic, and interconnected part of the European project. This dual focus on inclusion and distinctiveness reflects a strategic vision in which Central Europe strengthens the EU's adaptability, coherence, and legitimacy.

Looking ahead, the Czech Republic continues to participate in debates on multi-speed integration, institutional reform, and EU crisis management. Its approach emphasizes diversity, historical awareness, and the productive interplay between regional and European identities, positioning Central Europe as a source of resilience and adaptability within the EU. This forward-looking strategy not only enhances the Czech Republic's influence but also demonstrates how regional identities can coexist with and enrich supranational structures.

In sum, the Czech Republic's role in redefining Central European identity is characterized by a complex interaction of historical reflection, normative engagement, discursive construction, and institutional participation. The country actively negotiates the boundaries and content of regional identity, mediates between national and supranational imperatives, and contributes to the ongoing evolution of European identity. Its approach shows how a regional actor can assert agency, preserve historical and cultural distinctiveness, and simultaneously engage constructively in supranational processes, offering important insights into identity, integration, and regional influence in contemporary Europe.



## References

- Barnett, M., & Duvall, R. (2005). Power in international politics. *International Organization*, 59(1), 39–75.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Checkel, J. T., & Katzenstein, P. J. (2009). *European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dangerfield, M. (2018). The Visegrad Group in the European Union: 2016 as a turning-point? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56(1), 133–149.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The Uniting of Europe*. Stanford University Press.
- Hanley, S. (2012). Dynamics of new party formation in the Czech Republic. *East European Politics*, 28(2), 119–143.
- Havel, V. (1992). The power of the powerless revisited. *Journal of Democracy*, 3(2), 23–33.
- Hettne, B., & Söderbaum, F. (2000). Theorising the rise of regionness. *New Political Economy*, 5(3), 457–472.
- Innes, A. (2001). *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kazharski, A. (2022). Central Europe Thirty Years After the Fall of Communism: A Return to the Margin?
- Kundera, M. (1984). The tragedy of Central Europe. *New York Review of Books*, 31(7), 33–38.
- Moravcsik, A. (1998). *The Choice for Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Petrović, T. (2025). (Re)Constructing Europe: Has a Common Identity Integrated Europe? *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies*.
- Risse, T. (2010). *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rupnik, J. (2007). From democracy fatigue to populist backlash. *Journal of Democracy*, 18(4), 17–25.
- Rupnik, J. (2007). Europe's eastward enlargement. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 305–328.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2005). *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- ter Laak, T. (2025). Non-European European Union Member States: An Analysis of the Effect of European Identity Denial by the European Union on Czechia and Hungary. *Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts*.



Vachudova, M. A. (2005). *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zielonka, J. (2006). *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Conflict of interest:**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.