The main change in the political organization of Central Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries was the establishment of the decisive presence of the Ottoman Empire across Anatolia and the Balkans during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Poland-Lithuania was located at the core of Central Europe, alongside the lands of the Kingdom of Hungary, then mostly either directly incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, or made into this Empire’s vassal (autonomous) Principality of Erdel (Transylvania). The Ottomans accorded a similar status to the Danubian Principalities of Bogdan (Moldavia) and Eflak (Wallachia), which previously had been in Hungary’s (and the former also in Poland’s) sphere of influence during the late Middle Ages. The Ottoman Empire made the Black Sea into its internal body of water. The Holy Roman Empire under Habsburg rule dominated the west of Central Europe. They also controlled the westernmost sliver of Hungary (including Croatia and today’s Slovakia), not seized by the Ottomans. What is more, the House of Habsburg established itself on the Spanish throne, meaning they ruled most of the Apennine Peninsula (alongside Sicily), apart from the Papal States and Veneto, the latter dominated by the merchant Republic of Venice. For almost a millennium (from around 800 until 1797) Venice controlled trade in the Adriatic, the Aegean, and much of the eastern Mediterranean. Venice underpinned its commercial and economic success by seizing a string of islands and bridgeheads in this area, together with the Adriatic littoral of the Balkans. To a degree, this republic’s success was a legacy of Venice’s participation in the crusades and due to the fact that its direct competitor, the similarly merchant Republic of Genoa (1001–1797), was permanently pushed out from this area, following the loss of its territories in the Black Sea and the Aegean, either to the Ottomans or to Venice. After the mid-sixteenth century, Genoa’s commercial dominance was largely contained to the western Mediterranean.

As much as the religiously justified conflict separated the Ottomans from the Christian powers in the north (Poland-Lithuania) and the west (Holy Roman Empire), commercial links maintained by Venice (and the Adriatic Republic of Ragusa, 1358–1806) still connected both enemy parts of the region. The territorial expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia and the Balkans coincided with the Muslim loss of Al-Andalus (Iberia) to Spain and Portugal. Drawing on the imagery of the Iberian Reconquista and the tradition of the Middle Eastern crusades, Poland-Lithuania, together with the Habsburgs’ rump Hungary and Spanish Kingdom of Naples, styled themselves into an Antemurale Christianitatis (Bulwark of Christendom). In ideological (confessional) terms, this stereotype was the reverse of the Islamic idea of Dar al-Harb (House of War) for referring to the non-Muslim lands, as opposed to Dar al-Islam (House of Islam), or the lands where the Islamic ummah (community) lived under the Caliph’s (Islamic) rule.

The uneasy relationships between Christians and Muslims in the basin of the Mediterranean led to the rise of a common language, without which it would have been impossible to trade or war. It was Lingua Franca or the “language of the Franks,” as Europe’s Christians were dubbed by the Levant’s Muslims. Lingua Franca was a (West) Romance-based pidgin (rudimentary mixed speech form, not native to any ethnic group) that also incorporated numerous Semitic (Arabic), Turkic, Greek, or Berber elements. It was employed from the height of the Reconquista in Iberia and of the Middle Eastern Crusades in the eleventh century until the turn of nineteenth century, afterward it was mostly replaced with French for interethnic communication. The spread of Lingua Franca was facilitated by the expulsion of Romance-speaking Jews and Muslims from Spain and Portugal in the wake of the Reconquista. Most expellees migrated to Morocco or further east across Islamic North Africa, which gradually became part of the Ottoman Empire. Most, especially Jews, retained their Romance speech.

In terms of the dialect continua, not much changed in Central Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. The main alteration was the stable emergence of the East Romance dialect continuum, connected to the late medieval founding of the Danubian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. These two polities together with Hungary’s Transylvania territorially overlapped with this continuum. At the same time, the presence of the medieval Turkic continuum connected to the steppe pastoralists was limited to the northern Black Sea littoral beyond the Danube delta. Similarly, the presence of the Romance-speakers south of the Danube (who probably gave rise to the Romancephone Danubian principalities) waned. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire, preceded by the Seljuks, gradually replaced much of the Greek dialect continuum with its Turkic counterpart in eastern and central Anatolia. Both continua became coterminous in western Anatolia. Turkic-speaking Ottoman administrators, soldiers, craftsmen, and traders established growing pockets of Turkic dialect continuum in the western Black Sea littoral and along the most important trade routes in the southern Balkans. In
these areas the Turkic dialect continuum mostly overlapped with its South Slavic counterpart.

In the northeastern corner of Central Europe, after gaining independence from the Golden Horde in 1480, the Grand Duchy of Muscovy expanded vastly at the expense of other Rus’ principalities (alongside the Republic of Novgorod) and of the post-Golden Horde khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia. As a result, North Slavic-speakers encroached on the lands of Finno-Ugric- and Baltic-speaking ethnic groups in the north, and those of Turkic-speakers in the south. The prolonged and devastating wars between Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy did not change anything in terms of dialect continua, because both warring parties were overwhelmingly North Slavic-speaking. The same is true of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), fought between Catholics and Protestants in the Holy Roman Empire. The majority of those involved in the conflict on both sides were Germanic-speaking. Significantly, this was war, alongside the 1654–1667 war between Muscovy and Poland-Lithuania and the Great Northern War (1700–1721), heralded the arrival of modernity in its worst aspect, namely, the mass extermination of population. The worst affected areas of the Holy Roman Empire lost as many as two-thirds of the population (especially, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and the Grand Duchy of Würzburg). A similar population loss was observed in the eastern provinces of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (or today’s Belarus) in the case of the second conflict; or in Royal Prussia, Mazovia and Wielkopolska during the third war.

The boundary between the Germanic and North Slavic dialect continua moved somewhat eastward. In the case of the Baltic littoral of the Holy Roman Empire and Poland’s province of Royal Prussia and fief of Ducal Prussia, it was mainly due to the Northern Crusade against a variety of Slavic and Baltic-speaking ethnic groups and their polities who stuck to their indigenous religions and forms of statehood. The same process of forced Christianization led to the rise of German-speaking nobilities as the ruling elite among the overwhelmingly Finno-Ugric- and Baltic-speaking populations in Finland; alongside Sweden’s Estland, Livonia, and Poland-Lithuania’s Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, or today’s Estonia and Latvia. Elsewhere the eastward expansion of the Germanic dialect continuum was a function of settling—on the invitation of rulers and local princes or nobles—formerly uninhabited forests and mountain areas. Settlers came from the relatively overpopulated areas of the Holy Roman Empire, or today’s Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, and western Germany. These settlers established important “islands” of Germanic-speakers in Poland-Lithuania’s Wielkopolska, Małopolska, and Ruthenia (Galicia); Hungary’s Upper Hungary (today’s Slovakia), Transylvania (in present-day Romania), and Banat (nowadays split between Romania and Serbia); and in Carniola (today’s Slovenia).

The expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula led to an increase in Sephardic Jews across the Ottoman Empire, whose presence was felt across the Balkans and Anatolia. In everyday life they spoke the (West) Romance language of Spanyol, which was known as Ladino (from the term “Latin”) when employed for book production, and especially for translating the Pentateuch. Sephardim predominantly wrote Spanyol (Ladino) with the use of Hebrew (“Jewish”) letters until the late nineteenth century. Afterward the French influence in the Ottoman Empire channeled through the Alliance Israélite Universelle convinced Sephardim to adopt the Latin alphabet for this purpose. However, mainstream Central European history is much more intimately connected to Ashkenazi Jews, whose rise is mainly connected to the late medieval and early modern expulsions of Jews from the Holy Roman Empire and western Europe. They were predominantly Germanic speaking. Their ethnolinguistic influence led to the disappearance of the medieval Judeo-Slavic (Knaanic) language by the turn of the sixteenth century, which was in turn replaced with Yiddish (or “Jewish German”). The majority of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim lived in Poland-Lithuania, leading to the diasporic spread of the Germanic dialect continuum as far as today’s western Russia.

The late medieval period is also connected to the arrival of Indic-speaking groups of Roma (“Gypsies”) to the Middle East and the Balkans from around the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It appears that their centuries-long migration from what today is Pakistan and northwestern India was facilitated by the existence of the two Persianate Muslim polities spawned or impacted by the expansion of the Mongol Empire, namely, the Delhi Sultanate and the Ilkhanate. Thanks to the Pax Mongolica these two states offered relatively safe passage to the Middle East. In the fifteenth century the presence of Roma was already observed in Poland-Lithuania and the Holy Roman Empire. Their specific customs and insulation from the outside authorities afforded by the Roma’s ethnic language of Romani mostly prevented their enslavement or reduction to the status of unfree serf peasants, except for in the two Danubian Principalities and Transylvania.

The successive Byzantine and Seljuk conquests of (Caucasian) Armenia in the mid-eleventh century, followed by the destruction of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (1198–1375) in southeastern Anatolia in the wake of the Middle Eastern crusades, sent successive waves of Armenian refugees. The eleventh century wave moved north of the Black Sea across the Golden Horde to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary, while its fourteenth century counterpart fanned across the Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia. The farther away from their Caucasus and Cilician ethnic homelands, the quicker the diasporic Armenian communities lost their Indo-European isolate language of Armenian and adopted the languages of their environs, especially Kipchak in Poland-Lithuania or Ottoman Turkic.

A similar diasporic presence was built across Poland-Lithuania, mainly from Muslim Tatar soldiers. They fled the Crimean Khanate or entered the military service of the Grand Duke of Lithuania for a variety of reasons. Because Tatar women did not follow them, such soldiers had no choice but to marry local Slavophone Christian women, who thus had to convert to Islam. As a result, the Tatar community survived and grew, but its Tatar ethnic language was lost already within a generation.

Unlike in Western Europe or Muscovy, religious homogeneity was never made into the ideological basis of statehood
nor enforced. The cleavage between Christianity and Islam cut across Central Europe, and the region’s polities and societies. A system of accommodating (ethno-)religious differences was developed in preference to extermination and lying waste large swaths of land. This was a tactic adopted by Muscovy in its wars on Catholic Poland-Lithuania and especially on the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire. In contrast, the Ottomans tolerated all populations of a monotheistic religion. Under sharia they were protected as dhimmī (protected persons or peoples), and under no compulsion to convert to Islam, apart from having to pay the jizya tax imposed on all non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. In addition, such non-Muslim monotheists were granted with non-territorial autonomy in the form of millet. The Osmanlıca (Ottoman Turkish) term millet denotes an ethno-religiously defined group with its own system of law overseen by the groups’ religious (ecclesiastical) authorities, which double as its self-government. A similar system of religiously defined non-territorial autonomy was practiced earlier in Al-Andalus, and to a degree in the Golden Horde and the Crimean Khanate. In the Ottoman Empire the earliest millets were founded for the Rum (that is, “Romans” in the meaning of Orthodox Christians), for Judaists (Jews) and Armenian Monophysites (namely, Christians believing in the single—divine—nature of Christ; the schism between Monophysites and Duophysites broke out in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, or today’s quarter of Kadıköy in Istanbul). Interestingly, although Roma typically adopted religions of their environs, their ethnocultural specificity convinced the Ottoman authorities to create a non-territorial Roma Sanjak (region, Çingene Sancağı) with its administrative center at the town of Kırk-kilise (Kırklareli).

Poland-Lithuania and Hungary followed suit by creating similar religion-based non-territorial autonomies for Jews and Armenians. In the former polity Roma also obtained a similar autonomy, which like in the Ottoman Empire, was not of a religious character. Tatars in Poland-Lithuania were incorporated into the estate of nobility with the privilege of retaining their religion of Islam. Apart from such ennobled Tatars, the other non-Catholic populations endowed with such non-territorial autonomies tended to have higher and different taxes and other responsibilities due to the Catholic character of Poland-Lithuania and Hungary. It was a disadvantage similar to the jizya tax imposed on non-Muslims in the realms of Islam. In Hungary’s Transylvania, “Saxons” (or medieval Germanic-speaking settlers from the Holy Roman Empire) were granted territorial autonomy, which after the Reformation became the center of Lutheranism.

The diaspora of Türkic-speaking Armenians was too small to leave any immediately discernible dent in the extant dialect continua in Central Europe. The same is true of Poland-Lithuania’s Tatars, especially because they adopted the North Slavic speech as their medium of everyday communication. In contrast, the visible, permanent, and demographically growing diasporic presence of the Indic-speaking Roma is marked on the map. Until recently, traditional European historiography paid hardly any attention to the Roma, because they did not develop their own states, churches, religions, or any elite structures of power and influence.