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Europe's East as spiritual space

Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christianity. Are these the only cornerstones of European culture? Almantas Samalavicius muses on the existence of a common European culture and the Central and Eastern European states' part in it.

Less and less are we able, even to experience and
understand what spiritual space is.

Stephen A. Erickson

The enlargement of Europe that recently enveloped its former borderland states has been accompanied by many hopes, especially in those regions that were previously dominated by totalitarian communist regimes and a planned economy. And yet, despite general upheaval and mass enthusiasm, most analysts of current European discourse agree that during recent decades the projects of European unification over the recent decades was based on politics and economics. As time went on, it became more and more obvious that in order to complete the project of integration, politics and economy should be supplemented by one more essential dimension – the cultural one.

The goal of incorporating culture into the present scheme of unity is not at all simple; the concept of European culture is flawless only at first glance; it remains so only when reduced to the level of superficial journalist clichés. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that there is hardly an entity that might be described as a "common" European culture, even though many of its constituent parts might be based on thousand-year-long traditions. It has been justly remarked that three important cornerstones, Greek philosophy, Roman law and last, but not least, Christianity, support the idea of a united Europe¹, but the national and regional varieties of supposed "European culture" are so many and so different that they sometimes are too complex to fit under the umbrella of this key-notion. This fact has been insightfully noted by George Schöpflin, who insists that in cultural terms Europe is hard to define, and if such a thing as a cultural Europe exists, it is first and foremost associated with wide cultural variety.² One can also add that recent decades have been marked with a tendency towards regionalization, i.e., many regions of European nation-states have made more claims than ever to their cultural exclusiveness, rich historical traditions and separate identity. The present cultural policy of the EU has been shaped to encourage and promote regional identity, and this factor contributes significantly to the rise of the variety of different cultures that co-exist in the European cultural space. Furthermore, one can conclude that that can be no fully integral, inclusive and common notion either of European culture or its identity that could not be questioned as doubtful. On the other hand, the lofty political rhetoric supporting the vision of a united

Europe often ignores many questions that eventually assume greater importance than earlier imagined. Even the strictly economic or political interests of the EU can no longer ignore the cultural domain, and there are several reasons to question the many notions that do not reflect either the shape or the content of present realities. Perhaps the all-encompassing qualities of political rhetoric stimulate the critical attitudes that in their own way map out the weakest and most vulnerable spots of the EU's political discourse. Thus, it is useful to reflect on some opinions that question superficial, overly lighthearted and optimistic approaches toward the idea of Europe offered by one-sided political discourse and its mirror-images disseminated by the mass media.

In a penetrating essay, Sonja Puntischer-Riekman draws our attention to the mythology associated with the widely publicized idea of European unity. She claims that this idea has become a magic formula and moral concept which has lost its former geographical meaning; this "Magic formula also masks that 'Europe' as a political notion has been constructed in the shadow of the Cold War. In this context, 'Europe' has been stylized as a system of values in which Communism is not included, although Marxism and Communism are genuine European inventions. This exclusion is evident not only in the Pan-European movement of the inter-war period, whose driving force was also a fierce anti-Bolshevism, but also in the bizarre formula of the 'Return to Europe' adopted by many Central and Eastern European intellectuals after the demise of the Soviet empire. The myth of Europe is a bright narrative of values like freedom, democracy, welfare, solidarity, modern technology and, above all, of high culture."³

These insights might provoke further thoughts about the fragility of the popular notion of a "common Europe," stylized somewhat too rapidly immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It is obvious that the expansion of the EU eastwards as well as the ascent of Central and East Central European states requires scrutiny and adjustment of the stale notion of Europe that was constructed during the half-century of the Cold War that inevitably left its footprints in the mentalities of European societies, both in the East and West. Physical barriers, military borders and mental walls were erected and strongly reinforced during this long-term period of military competition and political and ideological antagonism that resulted in isolation and the creation of many inadequate and distorted images on both sides.

It hardly needs to be mentioned that any attempt to identify Europe with its former western part after the collapse of communism and totalitarianism would obviously fail; since the unforgettable 1990's its geographical as well as mental boundaries have moved further east, and a number of formerly peripheral and borderline states have moved back to the "center," whatever that might mean. It is quite obvious that the Cold War made a huge impact upon the spatial concept of Europe and its limits. Soon after the Yalta and Potsdam conferences a large part of Europe that was destined to remain on the other side of the wall acquired the image of a remote (though not directly in the physical sense), closed, unfamiliar domain; a kind of quasi-Europe, a mirror of the despotic East, with little in common with the civilized world impersonated by the Western liberal democracy. For its own part, an asymmetric attitude towards Europe emerged east of the Berlin Wall: communist ideology identified the western side with a decadent, bourgeois, declining capitalist "West," and although the oppressed societies under the domination of Soviet regimes refused to accept this officially coined image, it gradually distorted the understanding of Europe. As Viacheslav Morozov has justly remarked,

viewing Europe from the eastern side, two Europes could be discerned: the "true" one and the "false" one. He further concludes that in Soviet discourse the Baltic states were attributed to the "false" Europe, and although many things have changed since the post-Soviet transformations and reconstructions, former stereotypes have proven to be much stronger than could have been previously imagined. In the cultural-political discourse of the new Russia, this dichotomy has remained, although somewhat disguised. This can be seen in the rhetoric of Russia's architects of international relations and politicians who are seized by the urge to insist on the "true" Europeanness of Russia by contrasting it to the notion of the West⁴.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the division of Europe into "true" and "false", emphasized by Morozov, existed not only in the discourse of old Soviet Russia. The same images could be spotted in the mass consciousness of the population of the Baltic states; their objects, however, were different: "true" Europe was the area stretching behind the Iron Curtain, while the so-called "socialist democratic" countries were viewed as representing the part of Europe that could be termed as "false." With the exception of Yugoslavia, which was considered an almost "capitalist" or at least "semi-capitalist" country, (i.e. it represented a kind of "true" European) all other socialist states were hardly perceived as being European or belonging to Europe. It should be added, however, that after the collapse of communism, this division, unlike in the new Russia, soon faded away, leaving hardly any marks in the present political discourse of the Baltic countries.

Identification with Europe is not a uniquely exceptional feature of cultural-political discourse in post-Soviet Russia. There have been and still are many competing and conflicting European identities. This is well demonstrated by the constantly arising new claims to the center of Europe by moving its signboard to the Alpine mountains in the former territory of Austria-Hungary, to the Carpathian mountains or to Lithuania, where the breathtaking "discovery" of French geographers a few years ago released a mass outburst of national enthusiasm seen rarely since the upheaval of the velvet revolution of 1990... These claims that seem to have no relation to political realities of the day, however, are based on deep subconscious feelings, the origins of which can be traced back into history. But since this issue goes beyond the scope of this essay, I will confine myself to a remark that whatever their sources, they give rise to the renewal of competition and arguments as to which nation or state is "more European" than its neighbors and that these feelings are especially characteristic to transitory societies that lack self-confidence.

Thomas Risse insists that national identity in one way or another influences and adjusts the feeling of European identity. He argues, "The very content of "European collective nation-state identity might also vary, depending on how various ideas of Europe resonate with nationally constructed identities. One would expect different interpretations with regard to what is understood as "European" in various national contexts and how Europe's "others" are defined." The conclusion drawn from these remarks might be taken as sound enough: according to Risse, the future prospect of European identification would probably not be based on convergence; instead, of such a unification of attitudes, another trend is more likely: emergences of "several versions of European nation-state identities are possible, depending on how much ideational space there is for 'Europe' in a given collective identity construction."⁵

It might be further argued that under such circumstances the expansion of Europe inevitably affects and eventually redraws the notion of Europe that was born and matured under the antagonism promoted during the Cold War; moreover, since it does not fit into the changed social and political European landscape. Different European identities or, more strictly speaking, different versions of national Europeanness meet and communicate in a common space. It should be noted that after the recent enlargement of EU, these identities have all acquired their own legal rights. This seminal transformation of geographical–cultural–political space challenges both: the former Europe's "East" and "West," because those two parts have an urgent need to reconsider and revise stale, stereotyped notions and images that were constructed during the Cold War period. Did not Jacques Derrida insightfully map these difficulties of structuring a new discourse, noting that the "Old Europe" no longer has prospects for either discourse or counter–discourse of its identification?

The old cultural–political derivative of the Cold War era no longer exists; however, its mental legacy seems to be still lasting and leaving its marks on the European discourse of the largest nation–states that were used to viewing the eastern parts of the continent as "others," i.e., marginalized, peripheral societies with questionable identities, still burdened with nightmares of their totalitarian past, which is also taken as fairly problematic when questions about their historical Europeanness arise. One of the most exemplary symptoms of the vitality of this kind of thinking was a notorious remark made by French president Jacques Chirac who attacked Lithuania as a "small brother" who missed a chance of keeping silent... Despite any possible turbulences, it is quite clear that the former "Western Europe" has no chance of structuring its actions towards Central and East Central European societies as West Germany did after the fall of the Wall, being able to tear down, reconstruct, adjust and incorporate social, cultural and political structures of former GDR. First, international realities have essentially shifted over fifteen years; on the other hand, during the same period the former "Eastern Europe" underwent significant changes, with the exception of a few countries such as Belarus, which turned into even a larger caricature of itself. Thus, after these transformations, a common European space can be created only on the grounds of parity, ongoing dialogue and negotiation over its meaning.

Another question is how the content of (Western) European civilization can be affected and enriched by Central and East Central European cultures? Which traditions, cultural legacies, values and experiences can be used for a "usable" renewal of Europe's spiritual and intellectual life? Furthermore, is the disappearing "Old Europe" able to absorb and make use of the ideas, experiences and practices shaped in different social, political and cultural contexts?

Let us not forget that in the societies of Central and East Central Europe, especially over the second half of the 20th century, "Europeanness" was an *elan vital*, an intellectual and creative energy that raised, consolidated and kept collective historical consciousness and memory alive during the periods when these societies were inflicted with anti–historical thinking and contempt of the past. Contrary to big Western European societies (with a few exceptions such as the Greece of the "black colonels" or Franco's Spain) that for centuries had no necessity to insist on their Europeanness or belonging to Europe, the nations of the Central and Eastern European realm had to search for points of support in their history and culture. Nationalism and Europeanness were the two cornerstones that were used as tools to resist the ideological barbarism of

the Soviet East. Europe was held to be a mythical space which had given birth to the narratives of the past of nations. Identity with European culture was one of the most significant factors that enabled drawing a symbolic borderland between oppressors and oppressed.

The notion of spiritual space chosen as the headline for this essay should be understood as consisting of a set of certain things characteristic to the region of Central and East Central Europe: historical fate, common experience of social life, collective memory, modes of resistance, etc., which despite some local peculiarities makes it possible to speak about the identity of the region that differs in many ways from Western European identity. Societies of this region – that were forced for decades to prove their Europeanness to themselves and to the rest of the world – during their oppression acquired their own peculiar traits and qualities, which are hardly to be found in societies that escaped Soviet-type communism. For these countries the word Europe has different meanings and it was far less bound to questions of existence. Meanwhile, most Western societies, which practiced freedom and enjoyed independence during the same period, gained a different sort of experience. Perhaps for this reason, Central and Eastern Europe became an attractive place for tourists coming from the "West" and especially from Nordic countries who set out to seek the lost experience of belonging to Europe with all its burdens of history. Let us not forget that Europeanness is inseparable from the oppressive experience of 20th century. Nazi and Communist ideologies were born and matured in Europe. Perhaps that is why societies that were less inflicted with the aftermath of World War II – guerilla resistance, deportations, gulags, abortive revolutions and the like – are inclined to trace the European spirit in the eastern parts of the continent that opened itself to the world immediately after the fall of Iron Curtain. The spiritual space of Central and East Central Europe, woven out of pain and suffering, today magically attracts crowds of visitors from countries where the lack of such experiences transformed itself into a crisis of identity. It is difficult to be and feel European and yet have no experience of the historical fate that befell upon Europe, most heavily, perhaps, on its eastern part.

Thus, are the concepts of Central and Eastern Europe valid? The answer to this question depends on what content is put into these concepts. If Eastern Europe is just a construction of the Cold War, it is no longer important or meaningful as a frame of reference to current socio-political realities. If Central Europe is just a nostalgic version of the Habsburg *Mitteleuropa* with all its specific connotations, it has lost both: its cultural context and all meaning, as was recently well argued by Gerard Delanty.⁶ And yet, if we understand this region as a spiritual space that has its own common history, memory and experience, these notions can recover their meaning and sense.

What are the prospects of this region's contribution to the development of European civilization? The answer to this question will also depend on the choices. If the eastern part of Europe will confine itself to the role of assimilator of products of Western consumer civilization, obediently shaping itself according to the ready-made models of mass culture, at best it can become its bleak, second-hand copy, having no signs of identity or individual character. But if Central and East Central Europe constructs its identity without aversion to its past and its experiences, without being ashamed of them, if it is not afraid to be and remain a little different, and if, finally, Europeanness is understood as an ongoing project of identity creation, waning European civilization can be enriched by this region of complicated fate with a number of values that have faded away and became flattened just because there was no

need to stand up and fight for them for a long, long time.

In a world that exhibits dangerous signs of intolerance, mass hysteria and hatred towards otherness (be it Islamic civilization or whatever else), the hard experience gained by Central and East Central Europe could become what Lewis Mumford termed a "usable past," a kind of Kantian regulative principle, which reminds us how far the temptation of intolerance, authoritarianism and totalitarianism can go... Everything that is preserved in the collective memory of this region can be instructive to Western civilization, on the condition, of course, we agree that history has meaning and is able to teach something to somebody.

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- ¹ Elga Freiberga. "European Values and Latvian Identity," In: *National Identity and Vision of Europe*, Annals of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, Vol. 23, Nr. IX, p. 34.
- ² George Schöpflin. "Towards a European Cultural Identity?," http://europa.contexts.hu/program/konf_enschoepf.html
- ³ Sonja Puntischer-Riekman. "The Myth of European Unity," In: *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. by Geoffrey Hosking and Georges Schöpflin, N.Y.: Routledge, 1997, p. 65.
- ⁴ Viacheslav Morozov. "In Search of Europe: Russian Political Discourse and the Outside World," <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2004-04-18-morozov-en.html>
- ⁵ Thomas Risse. "A European Identity? Europeanization and the Evolution of Nation-State Identities," In: *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*, ed. Maria Green Cowles, James Caporaso, Thomas Risse, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 202.
- ⁶ See, Gerard Delanty. *The Invention of Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995.

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