



Karl Schlögel

Europe tests its boundaries

A searching movement

With the disappearance of the Iron Curtain – the Great Border – the whole system of coordinates in Europe has changed. The East no longer exists, writes Karl Schlögel, but what has emerged in its place is neither the old nor the new. It is a no-longer and a not-yet.

When I am away at a university in the south or west of Germany and tell people that it is only eighty kilometres, or just under an hour's train journey, from Berlin to the Polish border, my words are always greeted with a disbelieving silence. People have the strangest ideas about what is "behind" Berlin. You can judge the extent of the feeling of foreignness by the astonishment many people experience on their first contact with "the East". They are amazed when they visit Cracow for the first time, and they can hardly believe their eyes when confronted by the Warsaw skyline with its new skyscrapers. The fact that Cracow is one of the oldest university cities worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as Padua, Oxford and Heidelberg only becomes comprehensible when one has been there. Hardly anyone knows that Riga, the capital of Latvia, was one of the leading centres of European Art Nouveau along with Brussels and Barcelona, and people are absolutely thrilled when they finally make it to Leningrad/St. Petersburg and find it hard to believe that this centre of European culture is situated so far away and so very much outside the Western European horizon. This applies not only to people with average perceptive powers but also to high-level European politicians. The image of Europe is still focused on the West. When we speak of the "new Europe", we think first of Brussels, Strasbourg, Luxembourg or even Maastricht, but certainly not of Prague, Warsaw or Budapest, although it was from there that the whole of Europe began. And hardly anyone thinks of Kiev, although it was once known as the "mother of all Russian cities" and the centre of Slavonic Christianity. Our awareness of Europe is, generally speaking, asymmetrical. Eastern Europeans are far more interested in Western Europe than the other way round. During the past decade, millions of Poles, Czechs and Russians travelled to the "other Europe" and acquired first-hand information and impressions, but there was no comparable movement from Western to Eastern Europe. This is not only because the infrastructure is better or there is more to see in the West, but also because we in the West are comparatively uninformed and disinterested. Even though it is partly true that the East is more "backward" and not as modern, that is no reason for the absurdly fanciful ideas we have about Eastern Europe. When we read the reports, we sometimes gain the impression that the East consists of nothing but chaos, crime and collapse, and we are surprised, when we actually go there, to see that children go to school, do their work and lead, admittedly strenuous, but otherwise normal lives. In short, east of Berlin is also Europe, a different Europe that still has to be discovered and assimilated.

Eastern and Western Europe are moving closer together. There is a new network and a new system of coordinates. With the disappearance of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, the whole system of coordinates in Europe has changed. In Berlin I see cars with number plates from Latvia, Russia, the Ukraine and, of course, Poland. The distances have shrunk. Cities that were once complete strangers have become neighbours. It is only just under five hours from Berlin to Prague or Warsaw, and two hours to Stettin or Posen. The airline network has changed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Nowadays you can fly to many cities in the Russian provinces. Europe is acquiring a new network. I observe it on the German–Polish border, where the caravan of stationary lorries is often sixty kilometres long. The whole of Europe is represented at these truck stops, with lorries from Barcelona and Helsinki, Naples and Vilnius, Rotterdam and Samara, Teheran and London. New main traffic routes and corridors are emerging, and new borders. Although the Great Border – the Iron Curtain – no longer exists, there are many new small ones. Anyone travelling from Berlin to St. Petersburg via the Baltic States now has to cross four borders where there used to be only two.

The inner centre, the inner axis of post-war Europe, was the Iron Curtain, the Wall that divided everything up and gave Europe a bipolar geography. The Wall was the principle of order in divided Europe. This is different now. The old historical regions of Europe are drifting apart, sometimes peaceably, as in Czechoslovakia or the Baltic States, sometimes more violently, as in later Yugoslavia or the ex-Soviet Union; and perhaps also in Western Europe, where, quite unexpectedly, a passionate desire for national independence has reappeared. In Europe, the historically different regions are re-emerging more strongly than ever: Northeast Europe around the Baltic Sea, for example, an area that bears the stamp of the Hanseatic League, which experienced an astonishing revival after the elimination of the split, is dreaming the dream of Hong Kong: in the double city of Copenhagen/Gothenburg, in Kaliningrad/Königsberg, and in the greatest urban agglomeration on the Baltic, the five-million city of St. Petersburg. And Southeast Europe, the catchment area of the region's most important capital, Istanbul, which – despite the religious differences – includes part of the Black Sea region, the Aegean Sea and the Balkans, extending as far as Bucharest and Sofia. Even in the south of Russia, on the Crimea and in the Ukraine, one feels something of the influence of the Ottoman–European metropolis, and I believe that it is not only Islamic fundamentalism but also the modernization potential and power of the metropolis with a population of twelve million that is important. Then there is Eastern Europe in the real sense, i.e. the Russian Federation, Belarus and the Ukraine; here, too, the order of things is changing. I do not think there is any doubt about the advancement of Moscow to a Global City of the Eurasian world, but Minsk and Kiev will also play an important role in the network. They will be the modernization centres of their region. Finally, there is Central Europe, i.e. the region which cannot be precisely defined. This was the area that was most badly damaged by the division, yet it is coming together again very fast – towns such as Milan and Vienna, Budapest and Bratislava, Warsaw and Vilnius, Lemberg and Cracow, Prague and Munich. Despite the twentieth-century disasters in which the essential and integral elements of Central Europe disappeared – above all the Jewish and German Diaspora – a strong consciousness of a communal history and tradition that is open to modernization still prevails. The real Western Europe with its centres of Brussels, Luxembourg, Strasbourg and – especially – London, Paris and Amsterdam, with the great "Blue Banana" axis from Manchester via the Rhine and Frankfurt am Main to Marseilles, Barcelona and Turin: this is the genuine, dynamic centre of the unification of post-war Europe, and it will probably

remain so. It is in many ways the European coast of the American–transatlantic world, just as Hellas was once situated on the Roman–dominated Mediterranean. And Southern Europe, where the Eternal City and the heart of Old Europe beat and beats, the centre of the Occident. This overview is not complete. It is merely an indicator of the fact that this polarized Europe of old has dissolved into a multipolar Europe, and that we must learn to reckon with these differences, these centrifugal forces, and also with this strength.

Europe cannot be comprehended simply in terms of statistic data or details of distances in kilometres, for it is a phenomenon of the mind, of the collective memory, of national traumas and longings. This, of course, applies particularly to a difficult and strained relationship such as that between the Germans and the peoples of Eastern Europe. After centuries of inspiring and fascinating cooperation, a phase of unprecedented destruction followed in the twentieth century, in which the old network of German cultural relationships broke down. After the German war and German rule from 1939 to 1945, things could never be the same again. Even half a century of peace cannot simply erase traumas of this kind. War, persecution, occupation, philosophical war with the revocation of all the previously valid norms, genocide, and finally the reaction to all this in expulsion and ethnic cleansing – all this has left deep marks. On the other hand, each generation creates its own image of the world and of the past. With the new experiences that we make today, a new history is emerging. The rising generation of Europeans is re–mapping Europe. And it may be that on this map the present plays a greater role than the past that the young people know only from hearsay.

The disappearance of the East brought the end of the old West hot on its heels. Europe was what it was through the whole of the post–war period because of the division of the world. Post–war Europe consisted of the opposites of "democracy and dictatorship", of "capitalism and socialism", of "freedom and oppression". These were the ideological codes for the existence of two hemispheres, two different ways of life. The division determined the mental economy of the continent. It defined the alternatives and the lack of alternatives. We always had to decide. Post–war Europe's solution was the either–or, the unambiguity, the yes or no. Now the East no longer exists. What has emerged in its place is neither the old nor the new. It is a no–longer and a not–yet. It is no longer a dictatorship, nor is it a real democracy, perhaps a "dictocracy". The unambiguity has vanished. The West has lost its enemy in the East. The barbarians, without whom the West apparently cannot live, come from other parts of the world today. The mirror that the West gazed into has disappeared.

The new Europe did not spring from Zeus's brow but is growing up from below. There is a lot to be learned from the new East. In the past ten years the people of Eastern Europe have experienced and been involved in great changes which everyone feared would end in a political and social catastrophe. Despite the terrible wars in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus, the "transformation" was, by and large, peaceful and humane. Although the living conditions of an entire society changed drastically and sometimes brutally, there were no revolts or rebellions or militant conflicts. People showed a high level of social discipline, political wisdom and patience. Confronted with almost hopeless everyday situations and rapid changes of living conditions, they did not lose their nerve, they did not succumb to hysteria and panic, and they developed a remarkable capacity for creative improvisation. This growing Europe is not identical with the strategic plans for Europe drafted in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg.

The central planning activities are still bound up with the "expansion of Europe". There are several illusions in this formulation. Firstly, the expansion of the European Union is not the same as the expansion of Europe. Europe is also those parts that do not belong to the EU. Eastern Europe is also Europe. What the essential "core Europe" can learn from Eastern Europe is above all faith in the ability of institutions to renew themselves, in the strength of the basic activities of the civil society, and the improvisational power and ability of countless individuals. Societies like the Polish one, for example, have shown that far-reaching and enduring changes which are desired and understood by the people themselves can be realized in collaboration with them. It is this faith in the self-assured independence of the civil society that is the most important condition for the success of the new Europe.

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