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## Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe: Toward a Common Ethos

### Abstract:

The aim of this essay is a philosophical reconstruction of the category of Eastern Europe (as *topographical* and *ethical*, and only by implication a geographical one). This will proceed in three steps. First, deconstruction of the category in question by exposing its colonialist and post-colonialist origins. Second, projection of a new cultural geography of Eastern Europe. The main criteria of which are: 1) belonging to the European community of values, 2) being directly and permanently exposed to a paradoxical cultural formation, neither European nor Asian, which poses a constant threat to all neighboring states and nations – Russia. In the third step, Eastern Europe is presented as a specifically determined way of living, experiencing, and self-understanding, localized in particular *space(s)*; that is, a particular *ethos* rooted in a concrete *topos/topoi*. This *ethos* has been driven by the ideals of freedom, equality, cultural diversity, and the sovereignty of the people; and actualized in a kind of cultural flexibility, hybridity, and polyphony. However, this *ethos* has never been something given. It has been gradually developing throughout its dramatic history, and this was not only a history of those sublime ideals (and their partial actualization), but also of their real and brutal negation. That is why this *ethos* is grounded in a constantly renewed activity of self-questioning and self-searching, in a persistently recurrent will of self-determination; and that is also why Eastern Europe cannot be enclosed in a single narrative, but it expresses itself through different and often competing stories.

### Keywords:

Eastern Europe, cultural geography, cultural formation, colonialism, ethos, topos, cultural diversity, eidos

The category of Eastern Europe is a historical category.<sup>1</sup> It was created in a particular historical epoch; for specific reasons.<sup>2</sup> Once coined, it had a long history culminating in the postwar period, when it became a common label for all the states and lands remaining in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. A common ascription usually associates it with precisely this period and with the fate of the peoples unlucky enough to have fallen under the control of Russia in its new monstrous guise. In fact, the category itself (at least in its implicit form) had become a convenient theoretical tool for effective objectification, differentiation, and othering of that whole part of the continent (lying, roughly, east and south-east of the German lands), not only long before the rise of the Soviet Union, but even before the birth of Russian Empire as such (1721). Regardless of all the differences between the peoples – they had all eventually fallen under the same cultural umbrella.

In the postwar period it was eventually grounded in apparently objective (mainly political, economic, and social) criteria thoroughly laid down in countless works and analyses.<sup>3</sup> It became a very special object of political, social, economic, historical, and legal discourses. Each of them casts both light and shadow on the construct (Eastern Europe) itself. Each of them had its own specificity and its own methodological orientation. Each of them was trying to explain this particular formation – Eastern Europe – by referring to different explanatory categories: economic ineffectiveness and underdevelopment, atrophy of the social realm, and the alienation of people from the realm of the political – to point out just a few.

With all this discursive diversity and multiplicity of theoretical perspectives there was a common agreement as to one fundamental point: Eastern Europe was to be seen and experienced as a worse Europe. The only problem is that this mode of perceiving and experiencing (even when there was a common agreement as to its objective grounds in times of communism) is simply neither neutral nor innocent; it simply hides its own origins. It is nothing more than a radicalization of the processes of theoretical and political objectification, cultural domination, and imaginary representations that have lasted for the last few centuries; in short: of many, sophisticated, colonial strategies. What is missing most in the dominant discourses today is a genuine, positive account of Eastern Europe. In short, “Eastern Europe” is like a shameful cultural label to be avoided at every cost: as if there were no virtues, no values, no *ethos* of which the peoples living in the Eastern part of the continent could be proud (or at least not ashamed) of. Besides those positive ascriptions *generously* granted to them by the subjects/Subject<sup>4</sup> of this process of objectification.

A broader, unbiased, philosophical account of Eastern Europe is also missing. One which would not reduce “the thing itself” to any theoretical frameworks, set of explanatory concepts, or a particular scientific paradigm, but rather would reach to foundational modes of experience – in the whole richness of their historical determina-

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1) I would like to thank editors Jan Molina and Marcin Rychter for all their thorough and critical, often highly challenging, editorial comments. They helped me enormously to improve the essay, better articulate some points, avoid many mistakes, and they forced me to critically rethink many problems connected with the subject matter.

2) However, it was created not without reasons. To put it simply, even if it is a predominantly cultural construction, this construction was not only a product of a free-floating phantasy. It was based on a recognition of some significant differences between Western and Eastern Europe, differences concerning the way in which the political, the social and the economic spheres were arranged, or how and to what extent they were supported by legal order. It is probably difficult to judge which of these models was better – mainly because (as it will be said later), Western Europe itself was in the making, in the process of creating its own identity; and as such it presented, in fact, many different models and proto-models. Two things seem to be clear: first, the so-called Western model appeared (if we can use it in a singular), to be more self-sustainable, and therefore, more successful. Second, to put it in a trivial way, something can be judged as better or worse only when one's own concepts, and one's own rationality are seen as the objective criteria. Needless to say, such strategy is always at the core of all colonializing processes.

3) See, for example, Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*; already a classical collection of essays by economists, historians, political scientists – Chirot ed., *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*; Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe*.

4) That is, particular theorists, thinkers and so forth, and Western Europe (or more broadly the West) as such.

tions – of peoples living in this part of the continent. An account which takes into consideration the multiplicity and diversity of cultural codes, narratives, self-interpretations, systems of values, and so forth; and strives to reveal Eastern Europe's *eidos* in the variety, dynamics, plurality, and polyphony of its manifestations. Such work extends far beyond a single essay written from a limited (in this case, Polish) perspective. The idea and the phenomenon itself, demands a long lasting, multi-perspectival, trans-regional, and inter-disciplinary project. So, this essay is the first modest step in this direction, as well as an invitation for the undertaking of such a project.

For this first modest step, what follows is a provisional map of the phenomenon in question. This is a map in a double sense: first, the cultural-geographical – which comes with a proposal for a cultural reframing, or new delimitation of Eastern Europe; second, the theoretical – which will draw provisional *topographical* and *ethical* contours for a new understanding of Eastern Europe. This will be done in three steps: first, deconstruction of the category in question by exposing its colonialist and post-colonialist origins. Second, projection of a new (in fact, the novelty of this projection is only partial) cultural geography of Eastern Europe. Third, after putting aside all discourses describing and constituting the dominant image of Eastern Europe, it is presented as a particular cultural formation; that is, a specifically determined way of living, experiencing, and self-understanding, localized in particular *space(s)*; that is, a particular *ethos* rooted in a concrete *topos/topoi*.

### 1. “Land of Desolation”

The category of Eastern Europe has a long and dramatic history. It is much longer than we usually assume; and it is dramatic in a double sense. It designates the fate of the peoples who, throughout the last few centuries, have experienced (and not only survived, but courageously fought against), the imposition of enormous suffering, humiliation, abasement, deprivation of dignity, and of the ability to exercise right ethical judgment (this can be best exemplified in different forms of collaboration with oppressors). The imposition culminated in the twentieth century when Eastern Europe became a stage on which the most horrific drama of European history took place: the radical experiment which pushed the limits of humanity to the extremes only to transgress even them. Nazi-German and Soviet-Russian powers conducted this barbaric experiment in parallel. If this experiment, this drama, was to be possible, the stage and scenography needed to be properly prepared, furnished, and mentally mapped as a potential space for such a demonic play. Obviously, the immediate work was done here by the abovementioned main actors.<sup>5</sup> However, their work was not done in a cultural void. It was only a radicalization of the long-lasting Western tradition of framing, conceptualizing, representing, and eventually commonly experiencing particular European lands and their people in a particular (or rather peculiar) way; in a way where fantasy reigned over an unbiased observation, and imaginative othering over an attentive and just evaluation of local particularities and their respective axiological frameworks. But such an imaginative othering appeared to be a necessary mechanism in the process of making/projecting Western identity. In this way, the category of Eastern Europe was conceptualized and dramatized into the sphere of inferiority, barbarity, political and social paradoxes, bad manners, and economic poverty – to point out just a few of the most emblematic determinations.<sup>6</sup> All this took place long before WWII and the postwar political order which cut the continent in half.

The ambivalent position of, what was then referred to as, Eastern Europe within the European community had already appeared in the Middle Ages and was in a sense the consequence of a belated Christianization

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5) See Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

6) See Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

(this also meant a belated implementation of Roman heritage – e.g., certain forms of political and social organization).<sup>7</sup> This position was articulated in political and theological categories, and had been determining the constituents of “the younger Europe” based on an act of recognition by the Emperor and the Papacy. This act was always determined partly through the successful integration with Christianity (where criteria were not always transparent – to say the least), partly by the fundamental requirements and exigencies of the feudal economic system, and partly by political interests. It is precisely this combination of religious, political, and economic factors that led to the first radical, intra-European political clash between the West and the East – here represented by Poland and Lithuania (the former reproached for the superficiality of its faith and flirtations with paganism; the latter, because of the very late Christianization, reproached for its false intentions and its on-going paganism). The conflict found its resolution on the battlefield of Grunwald (1410) where the united Polish, Lithuanian, and Ruthenian forces confronted a powerful army composed of the knights from the almost whole of (Western) Europe under the leadership of the Teutonic Order. Four years later, the Council of Constance (1414–1418) was the stage of a legal-theological struggle between the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom and the Teutonic Order. During the Council, a representative of the Polish-Lithuanian side, theologian and lawyer Paweł Włodkowic, gave a passionate address defending, in the name of the very idea of *christianitas*, the rights of pagans (so brutally violated by the Teutonic Knights), and argued that a peaceful co-existence between pagans and Christians is possible.<sup>8</sup> This very address made him a pioneer of religious tolerance; something that would quickly become a rule in the Polish-Lithuanian state. Ultimately the European community recognized the cultural status of the two countries (united by a king<sup>9</sup>) marking, for that time, the Eastern borders of Europe. This act of recognition marked the beginning of the growth of the Polish-Lithuanian state to a position of significant political power, being at the same time at different moments and in different forms, a guardian of the Eastern borders of Europe. What is interesting here, and will not be without relevance for further considerations, is that the abovementioned clash had already shown the complex nature of both this part of the continent and the Europe of that time. Since, in fact, it was a conflict neither purely intra-Catholic, nor simply between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity.

The political project of Lithuanians, Poles, and Ruthenians (Belarusians and Ukrainians), and for a period of time with the creative contribution of Livonians, was realized outside of the centers of cultural and political life. However, it is also true that it participated in the European project. But it did so in *the peculiar form of appropriation and resistance*; and it is this combination of the apparently opposite attitudes that had an enormous impact on the overall shape of the Eastern-European *ethos* throughout centuries; for better or worse.

There is no doubt that a political structure dominated by a single social class (noblemen), along with a comportsing economic system, led not only to increasingly radical social injustice, but also to serious economic crisis (starting from the middle of the seventeenth century).<sup>10</sup> This eventually led to serious atrophy of the political system (culminating in the eighteenth century). While analyzing these processes and phenomena one is confronted with an image of the state condemned to self-peripheralization. And yet, the very same social-

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7) See Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa*.

8) It is worth noting that at the Council, Włodkowic was not simply (or cynically) defending *raison d'état* of his court. Consequently, he was among a few passionate defenders of Jan Hus. Furthermore, the Polish cause against the Teutonic Order had a significant influence on the Hussites's Revolution in Bohemia. These events marked the end of the last wave of eastward German expansionism in the Middle Ages. Zientara, *Historia powszechna średniowiecza*, 449.

9) At that time, since 1386, Poland (the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland) was united with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by the personal union. The Union of Lublin from 1569 turned it into the real union and created a single bi-confederal state – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Commonwealth survived until 1795 (the year of the last partition).

10) Wójcik, *Historia powszechna wiek XVI–XVII*, 1996.

political project was capable (precisely because of the abovementioned combination of appropriation and resistance), to create an exceptionally pluralistic, dynamic, cultural form; providing Europe with one of the first models of proto-democratic (in the modern, or rather pre-modern sense) organization of the political sphere; of multiculturalism and religious openness; of (internal) colonialist clashes (e.g., Cossacks uprisings), and so forth. Certainly, these phenomena should not be fetishized. And yet, they provided one of the first (certainly imperfect and partial), patterns for the modern European projects of the social-political sphere.

However, in the times of early modernity, from the Western perspective these phenomena were seen, from the start, as a sign of potential, and then actual, atrophy and degeneration, as a sign of an almost organic inability of East-European peoples to get properly cultivated. They were seen, if not even as barbarians then, at least, as very primitive. The very first examples of such perception can be found as early as the sixteenth century. For example, when in 1523 one of the greatest authorities of European Renaissance, Erasmus of Rotterdam, was addressing specifically Poles, he was saluting them for their capacity to abandon the state of barbarity and to become equal to the “enlightened” nations, and even actively contribute (surprisingly?) to the intellectual community of European nations.<sup>11</sup> In 1574 a French Prince Henri de Valois – shortly after being elected as king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – abdicated from the throne, without even fulfilling the basic procedures, or simply informing the officials, only to take the French throne. One of the members of his court – a poet Phillipe Desportes – described the lands de Valois was leaving behind as the lands of cold, darkness, the lands of “barbarian people” knowing nothing about the basic standards of humanly behavior.<sup>12</sup> The irony of this example speaks for itself.

All such statements and evaluations from the sixteenth century, however, were in a sense accidental. They were only the first attempts at identification of peripheral Eastern territories, of which Frenchmen, Dutchmen, or Englishmen had no specific knowledge (except that they were being provided with the grain from these territories). The situation changed dramatically in the eighteenth century and with the rise of the Enlightenment. And it changed on both sides of a “curtain” which from that moment on was methodically and scrupulously being created. Most of “Eastern Europe” (in whatever way it is delimited) was approaching the peak of economic, social, and political crisis marked by: the increasing ineffectiveness of the economic system, the increasing poverty of the majority of population, the aggressive forms of secondary serfdom, relatively slow development of cities and industry, and the gradual but undeniable atrophy of the political order which turned from democracy to oligarchy, and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

Among those factors, especially serfdom with all the brutality carried with it, was for the Western observers an emblem of (semi-)barbarism presented by the societies inhabiting the Eastern parts of the continent. It was a barbarism which had two aspects – the Western observers (in times when their countries were solidifying intercontinental empires based on radically violent abasement of countless cultures and ethnicities), could not believe that noblemen can treat peasants in such inhumane way – keeping them in a state of a supposedly full-fledged slavery. But they also could not believe how peasants can be so passive, dumb, dirty, and completely careless about their property. The synthesis of these two sides led eventually to an image of an Eastern European people in general. The people being, by their very nature (organically? – and this is not an exaggeration since many of these descriptions had an ambition to combine a proto-anthropological perspective with natural history) very low on the scale of the civilizing process, being barely capable of appropriating the most basic hygienic habits, or of acquiring a proper moral

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11) Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 10.

12) *Ibid.*

13) Wójcik, *Historia powszechna wiek XVI–XVII*, 458–61; Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, chapter 5.



consciousness.<sup>14</sup> So, it is not only in the economic sense that “Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century provided Western Europe with its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply all over the globe.”<sup>15</sup>

It is undeniable that the economic crisis (being the effect of the implementation of a one-sided economic model), strongly affected the majority of the so-called Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. It is also difficult to deny – especially in case of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – that the social-political system was based not only on the radical distance between the elites and the majority of population, but rather, on the real exclusion of the latter from the political sphere. It is hard to deny that this distance was maintained and supported by different forms of violence – from economic, through symbolic, to often purely physical. However, it is also true that the social stratification was far more complex than it was (and still is) presented. It is true that the status of peasantry was different in different parts of the region with regard to both personal freedom and economic status, where the latter was often much better than that of noblemen of a lower rank.<sup>16</sup> It is true that peasantry created communal structures which could exercise a resistance, sometimes quite effectively, toward the over-oppressive policies of noblemen. It is true that regardless of the economic depression there were still periods of growing prosperity.<sup>17</sup>

That means, such a radically negative image as the one provided above can be created/produced only when certain undeniable facts are absolutized, when a particular reality is seen in a one-sided, biased way. And it is seen so in *a truly colonialist effort to make this reality a real periphery of a particular center which itself is in the making*. But if this process is to work, certain operations of power and knowledge must be effectively introduced; as much as certain paradoxes (or rather heterodoxies) of cultural reality must be made more visible, while others must be concealed. There are many examples, of these cultural operations; what follows points briefly at only a few significant cultural operations, which contributed to the creation of what is now a product known under the name “Eastern Europe.”

Most of these operations can be found in a passage from memoirs of the count de Segur who was travelling through Poland on his way to Russia where he was to take a role of French ambassador. Driven by a hunger for knowledge and being a man of enlightened mind, a mind which was to resist all prejudices and prejudgments, he crossed the border between Prussia and the Commonwealth. At this very moment he had an overwhelming feeling that he had “left Europe entirely” and entered “land of desolation” (to use the phrase from another traveler):

An immense country almost totally covered with fir trees always green, but always sad, interrupted at long intervals by some cultivated plains, like islands scattered on the ocean; a poor population, enslaved; dirty villages; cottages little different from savage huts; everything makes one think one has been moved back ten centuries, and that one finds oneself amid hordes of Huns, Scythians, Veneti, Slavs, and Sarmatians.<sup>18</sup>

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14) The most radical expression of such synthesis, having Poles as its specific object, was a fascinating pamphlet, presented as a “methodical work in natural history,” published in 1780 under an emblematic title: “The Orangutan of Europe, or the Pole such as he is.” One can read there that the Pole is “the worst, the most contemptible, the vilest, the most hateful, the most dishonorable, the dumbest, the filthiest, the falsest, the most cowardly creation among all the apes.” There is a certain irony about this pamphlet. It was written by a French officer who had been cashiered from the Polish army. There is no doubt, then, that it says something quite significant, though in different ways, about both the subject-matter and the author himself. Cited after Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 342.

15) Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 9.

16) See Ichnatowicz, Mączak, Zientara, and Żarnowski, *Spółeczeństwo polskie od X do XX wieku*, especially 242–54; Butterwick, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1733–1795)*, chapter 1.

17) See Butterwick, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1733–1795)*, chapter 1.

18) Louis-Philippe, comte de Segur, *Memoires, souvenirs, et anecdotes, par le comte de Segur*, vol. I, in *Bibliothèque des memoires: relatif it Phistoire de France: pendant le 18e siecle*, vol. XIX, ed. M. Fs. Barriere (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Freres, 1859), 300; after Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 19.

Putting aside the brilliant metaphor of trees, which are “always green, but always sad,”<sup>19</sup> let’s concentrate on more serious issues. What can be seen here, in condensed form, are all the processes of objectification which were at work during the Enlightenment. First, a *radical delimitation*: These lands do not belong in a full and proper way to the European civilization. But, neither do they belong anywhere else. So, here was one of the main paradoxes of Eastern Europe as it was constructed by the West. In short, Eastern Europe is the “non-European Europe.” It was included and excluded at the same time. It was excluded since it simply did not fulfill the civilizational standards of the West (of Europe in general? France? England? Prussia? Of the philosophers from Parisian literary salons?). It was included since in most of the dominant views (of philosophers, travelers, all proponents of increasingly absolutist rulers of the Western countries), there was hope for these peoples, there was a hope that they could eventually be turned into proper human beings. They were placed “on the developmental scale that measured the distance between civilization and barbarism.”<sup>20</sup>

The second significant operation was that of *imaginative othering*: The peoples of the Eastern territories do not share the Western identity; they are similar only in some regards and to some degree. But a supposedly strong component of barbarism introduces a decisive difference. They are like the embarrassing younger brothers. But this was only a moderate version of imaginative othering. What we can see in the quote above is a much more radical example. It is not so much about developmental scale. The peoples of Eastern Europe are projected into the radically opposite zone of civilization – they are “savages” within European boundaries. And so, the verdict here is more like: They are here, they are living on the same continent, there can be an illusion of similarity in some regards, but in fact, they are not like us at all. They are radically other. They are no longer our mirror-image. They are an inverted image of us. That is why they are worthy of being observed, described, and determined – in this way we will better know who we are.<sup>21</sup>

The third operation closely connected with the previous one is *the mythical projection*: These lands are mythical, populated by creatures coming from the far-distant past, from the shadows of history. They are like “the hordes of Huns, Scythians, Sarmatians.” What is interesting here is that this figure of the hordes of,

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19) Here I must confess that we always think of Polish trees and forests as being hopelessly, overwhelmingly, depressively, almost disgustingly sad, and always green even ... in winters; and this fact makes them even more sad. We do not know whether this is also an experience of peoples inhabiting other countries in the Eastern part of the continent. But in our case, we are more than sure that the persistent sadness of our forests is the main cause of all Polish historical predicaments, and of our shortcomings. We could be much better, much more successful, smarter, and cleaner if we were lucky enough to have happy and joyful forests.

20) Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 13. It is not difficult to see how this dialectics of inclusion and exclusion – which is also made very clear by Larry Wolff – is still relevant and operative in contemporary reality. For example, it is quite common to refer, in the Western idiom, to (South-, Central-, North-) Eastern countries, even those belonging to the EU, as “former members of the Soviet Union/Warsaw pact/Eastern bloc.” Even the change of political geography and a shift from the label “Eastern Europe” to “Central-Eastern Europe,” in fact, does not change much. It is like a reminder of our *suspicious* past.

21) Interestingly, the same logic was applied to Russia with two significant, and somehow opposite, differences. First, most “discoverers” of Eastern Europe claimed that all these signs of barbarity they encountered in Eastern Europe were also to be found in Russia, but to an incomparably larger degree. So, in their view it was just a quantitative difference. Second, some of them (like Voltaire who never visited Russia) claimed that Russia, since the time of Peter the Great, and especially in times of Catherine II the Great, appropriated Western political models and in this sense became a truly European country in opposition to other parts of Eastern Europe. Blinded by a childish naïve belief, they were unable to see the superficial, illusionary, and, simply speaking, false nature of the political changes which were supposedly to transform Russia into an enlightened, absolutist monarchy based on the rule of law. In fact, it was another guise for despotism. If one can understand such naivete in the case of politicians, theorists, and philosophers of the Enlightenment, one can be very deeply surprised by the very same naivete presented by recognized contemporary historians. One of the best examples of that can be remarks on Russia of the eighteenth century by Philip Longworth. See Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe*, chapter 7, and page 328. Longworth, in order to make his point, rejects even those testimonies of natives, who would likely have more profound insight. Thus, he rejects, for example, Joseph Brodsky’s idea that Russia (at least of that time), should be understood as “Western Asia,” rather than Europe. *Ibid.*, 328.

especially, Scythians was used by travelers and thinkers in the eighteenth century to describe almost all lands of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (they saw these “Scythians” literally everywhere). One can say the phenomenon of such a projection is quite universal – we know it from the ancient times, we know it from Renaissance Italy (where, until at least mid of the sixteenth century, Germans were considered barbarians coming from the North). The only problem is that in these latter examples, this mythical projection was directed either toward lands completely unknown (simply lying far beyond the limits of the known Western world), or they were closely connected to a radical political threat. In our case, de Segur – a highly educated political representative of France, that is, of the indisputable, at that point, center of the Enlightenment – observes with his own eyes some real lands, inhabited by real people not posing any political risk or even any signs of hostility. It seems he dramatically fails in his plan (with which he came to Eastern Europe) to be a neutral observer. It seems that his perception was specifically organized in advance. It is filled with pre-judgments, ready-made metaphors, and strongly permeated by phantastic images (a disposition quite common for every person coming to unknown lands for the first time). In consequence, he falls victim to a constant confusion of fact and fiction, to what can be observed as the real state of affairs and what is, in fact, nothing more than a series of phantasms. In short, in his account one is confronted more with a fictional projection than an objective report based on facts.

Fourth, in his reports (and again his memoirs can be treated as presenting a kind of condensed view which in many regards is simply emblematic to the overall perspective of the Enlightenment) these lands are seen as lands of desolation. A feature of the picture de Segur draws is an overwhelming feeling of *emptiness*, only here and there interrupted with some small “islands” of cultivated land. The immense, fertile lands whose potential is, for the most part, wasted simply because they are inhabited by uncultivated people incapable of a properly planned cultivation of land. In the works of many representatives of the Enlightenment there is a short formula for it: *disorder and chaos versus order and culture*. This formula and this image – regardless of its real value – will have an enormous impact on the political aspirations of European empires starting from France in times of Napoleon, and ending in German and Russian plans culminating in WWII<sup>22</sup> (in fact, the current Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that this motivation, and this kind of politics is still very much relevant).

The fifth significant operation of producing “Eastern Europe” is, in a sense, a consequence of the previous ones. We see its first signs in the words of de Segur. However, he could not fully explicate it since, at the time of his famous travel to Russia, there were not yet explicit theoretical frameworks. These frameworks were just slowly appearing, above all, in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, then in Humboldt, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. What I mean here is the rise of ethnography, folkloristic studies, the first foundations for philosophy of race. Within these frameworks all the peoples inhabiting Eastern Europe eventually received their common name – based either on primitive ethno-physiological, or linguistic criteria: Slavs. In fact, oftentimes it did not really matter whether these criteria adequately fit into the reality, nor did it really matter (in fact not at all) what is the opinion of those being classified (the best example here is the temptation to count Hungarians as Slavs, simply because their language was clearly... Slavic). At this point the peoples of Eastern Europe – Slavs along with other ethnicities inhabiting these lands – became *the explicit object of all possible operations of knowledge*.<sup>23</sup> They were being described,

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22) See Snyder *Bloodlands*; Snyder, *Black Earth*.

23) Obviously, the peoples of Eastern Europe (Slavs and “Slavs”) were one among many objects of these research endeavors. In this sense they were not a privileged object of this increasing interest in *primitive ethnicities*. However, one can claim that a geographical proximity between Germany and the Commonwealth (and other East European lands) made it an easily accessible object of scrutiny. What is certainly interesting here is the specific trajectory of nation- or, more broadly, ethnic-oriented reflection. First, there is observation of others, then there is the better realization of the identity of “we” or “I.” That was perfectly visible in case of Fichte who travelled to Poland in 1791 (see some remarks concerning his observations in the following passages), and only after approximately 15 years he presented some nation-oriented conclusions concerning the present and future greatness of the German nation thoroughly laid down in his “Addresses to the German Nation” [1807–1808].



classified, and determined on the basis of physiology, anatomy, temperament, physical, mental, or even moral capacities. The beginning was charmingly “generous.” When Herder with lots of enthusiasm and empathy was describing a general psycho-cultural “design” of inhabitants of Eastern Europe – in general, Slavs – he noticed that the prevalent feature of their culture, of their general attitude toward the world and other people was their musicality (this wonderful label was applied above all to Ukrainians). So far, so good. However, it very quickly turned out that “musicality,” or rather, so to speak, oblivious musicality was, for Herder, a distinctive feature of... primitive, “unpolished” cultures.<sup>24</sup> The radicalization of this perspective can be found in Johann Gottlob Fichte whose remarks from his travels to Poland are very colorful – full of cultural, and more specifically, ethnic and racial categories. The wildness of the people (typical of all Slavs) and of domestic animals, dirtiness, neglect, a lack of good manners on the one hand; and interesting descriptions of physical appearance and sexual temperament on the other hand. For example, readers could learn from Fichte that Polish women were of “a fine skin and color, but fleshy,” “so slovenly, ... so shaped, so inviting, and so dirty.” However, they presented “a stronger sex drive than German females.”<sup>25</sup> Fichte described Polish cities as full of dirt and garbage and “swarm with Jews” (!) (“Jews without end” as William Coxe, another enlightened Western traveler to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth described, a bit shocked, when travelling through Grodno and Vilnius). Fichte also made an interesting observation on the potential cultural impact that Polish people may have on members of a civilized nation. He obviously meant Germans living in Polish lands – they maintained their good manners, politeness, sense of obligation, rationality, but they were almost as dirty as Poles, what is obviously, more shocking for a German visitor. Although Fichte did not make any such claim, it is easy to see how his observation might have contributed to a much more contemporary (and too well-known) thesis that as an inferior culture, the uncultivated ethnos of the Poles – like all Slavs and non-Germanic nations and ethnicities existing among Slavs – pose to Germans a risk of cultural (and racial) degradation.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel concluded, in a sense, this train of thinking about Slavs in general by bringing his reflection on the topic from just a composition of different linguistic, ethnographical-folkloristic, or racial observations, to the level of philosophy of history. This allows him not only to maintain that Slavs (and non-Slavonic peoples living among them), regardless of some “minor” differences, are simply one proto-nation. It also allowed him to notice that they do not essentially belong to history (understood as the rational process of the actualization of Freedom), but are, in a sense, accidental. They had not proved their capability to become an independent, rational force among other such forces which jointly contribute to the realization of the world-history *telos*. To put it bluntly, these peoples – either taken collectively (“one vast nation”) or individually – did not deserve the status of a historical subject. Although Hegel admitted that some “tribes” from this “one vast nation” had shown the symptoms of being influenced or even formed by European ideals, that some of them had even showed that they were capable of courageously fighting for and defending those very ideals (he even generously provided the example of the battle of Vienna 1683) – but his ultimate diagnosis was that these ideals had not been constitutive for their essence. Although, Hegel generously added that all this was true (and the only truth) as far as history is concerned, so it would not say anything about the future,<sup>26</sup> but the philosophical and cultural effect and impact of his analysis was clear enough. The category of Eastern Europe

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24) Johann Gottfried Herder, “Von Ähnlichkeit der mittlern englischen und deutschen Dichtkunst,” *Herders Werke*, vol. II, ed. Regine Otto (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1982), 289; after Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 310.

25) Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Briefvechsel*, vol. I, ed. Hans Schulz (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 171–75, 176–78, 181–83; after Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 334–35.

26) See Hegel’s remarks on Slavonic nations in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, vol. II, 205–206.

as seen from Hegel's perspective means two basic things: first, it is a part of European culture (inclusion), which did not contribute to it in any significant way (exclusion). Second, that it should be subordinated to the leading historical-cultural force, which in his view is the German world, and eventually become properly enculturated, or it would be forever marginalized, forever lost in-between. As we know too well from history, the fate of Eastern Europe was to be equally (and painfully) affected by both scenarios.

The overall image of Eastern Europe as it was created in the eighteenth century should be supplemented by an additional aspect, (present in count de Segur memoirs as much as in most other reports/memoirs/treatises of that day), that is, by ever-present paradoxes and contradictions. For how could the eyes of any visitor from the Western countries, with already developed absolutist monarchies, resist nervous blinking when observing (while visiting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), for example, a mixture of monarchy and republic? This had to be a shocking observation. So shocking that it provoked the two most brilliant minds of those times to write, even without visiting that strange country, a devastating critique of Polish-Lithuanian mentality, disorder and anarchy (Voltaire) and the most enthusiastic eulogy praising the Polish-Lithuanian nation for being on the best path to become fully self-determined with its own genuine "national physiognomy," and as such being almost an exemplar for all future nations (Rousseau).<sup>27</sup> We should notice that the latter example was quite exceptional and characterized by some utopian projections so typical of Rousseau's philosophy of culture. In general, the Western observers saw a cultural reality radically different from their own. It was so different that they had a tendency to see and describe it in terms of deviation from how properly ordered reality should look, rather than in terms of an alternative. Therefore, they were very sensitive to all possible paradoxes and contradictions: interpreting them in a one-sided negative manner. So they saw a reality marked by tensions between: enormous richness and extreme poverty, the over-privileged status of a single class and the enslavement of another (without even going into the details), the Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian noblemen and a monarch in their struggle for sovereignty (which they experienced, in fact, simply in terms of political anarchy, disobedience, and lack of good manners), and a tension between an economy built upon immense *latifundia* and a drastic underdevelopment of cities and commerce, and so forth.

All these paradoxes or tensions received other guises in the postwar period when in the name of social justice, the society was effectively divided, the social capital was supposedly non-existing, the economy one-sided and therefore highly inefficient, corruption and lack of even a basic respect for a common good was something natural, and the poverty of the majority of population was overwhelming and ever-present. All of these are true for all countries on the wrong side of the "iron curtain." Perhaps, these characteristics were never truer than in the times of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. However, we should not forget – as I mentioned above – that they did not appear out of the blue, they had their origins. Furthermore, they were also permeated by many stereotypes produced (often, though not always, by Russian propaganda) only to strengthen the (centuries-old) image presenting the peoples from the Eastern bloc as uncultivated, robbers, thieves, dumb, and barely capable of appropriating genuinely European ideals. In short, the "Scythians" of the twentieth century.

## 2. Rewriting Cultural Geography

The contemporary geographical, political, economic and even cultural categorizations of what belongs to which part of the European continent are incoherent, often mixing criteria belonging to completely different dimensions. If we rely on purely geographical categorization – assuming that the Ural Mountains mark the border of Europe – we should admit that, for example, Poland belongs to Western Europe; while Ukraine, Belarus and perhaps the

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27) See Rousseau, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*.

Baltic states should be counted as Central Europe. If we consider a political, and political-economic perspective, things get more complicated. For example, according to the CIA World Factbook, Eastern Europe includes not only Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, but also the Baltic states – in short, all European countries belonging to the former Soviet Union, while relegating Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and other former members of the Warsaw Pact to Central Europe. The UN geoscheme for Europe proposes yet another division, where all the states which once belonged to the Warsaw Pact plus not only the European part of Russia, but also its Siberian part belong to Eastern Europe; meanwhile the Baltic states are counted as Northern Europe. According to EuroVoc, all countries of the former Soviet bloc – excluding the Baltic states (classified as Northern Europe) – belong to the broad category of “Central and Eastern Europe.” If we add to this picture the status of some (and only some) Caucasian states – then we will have quite a complicated picture of what Eastern Europe can mean. There are also conceptions attempting to provide a simplified cultural image – simply demarcating along religious-cultural lines. In accordance with one of them, the division of Europe is very simple – it consists of the Western part (formed by Roman Catholicism and Protestantism) and Eastern part (formed by Orthodox Christianity). Such conceptions with all their merits have one fundamental shortcoming – they provide us with a dramatically simplified image, completely unable to give justice to the complex and highly nuanced character of Eastern Europe.<sup>28</sup>

It is true that there are more or less justified (economically, historically, politically) reasons for all of the proposed divisions. As much as it is true that all these divisions are movable, changeable, and historical. However, the apparent chaos caused by this diversity of determinations (where some countries are at once Northern, Central, and Eastern European) is telling. Obviously, things are complicated, or to put it differently – they invite such a diversity of possible determinations, also because geography itself does not provide fully objective criteria as to where the boundaries between Europe and Asia should be situated. This is partly due to the fact that Europe is just one of the subcontinents of Eurasia. Therefore, all the proposals concerning its boundaries could be faced with a question: why here, and not there? Since ancient times there were a few proposals for where the line of demarcation should be drawn. In antiquity, the prevalent interpretations (Posidonius, Strabo, Ptolemy) had suggested the river Don (Tanais) to be the main Eastern line of demarcation between Europe and Asia.<sup>29</sup> What is interesting – this perspective was commonly accepted for a very long time – until almost the middle of eighteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was still pretty much uncontested. When a Polish scholar Maciej Miechowita published his famous work in 1517/18 (which, shortly after its publication, was translated into Italian and German, and re-printed many times in

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28) Such a line of demarcation can be based, for example, on Huntington’s division between Western and Orthodox civilization. Thus, Europe can be so easily divided into Western and Eastern, along oversimplified religious lines (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism vs. Orthodox Christianity). See Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order*. The similarly oversimplistic division was presented by Milan Kundera in his famous essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe.” Kundera, while defending the cause of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary under the communist regime, projected his own “iron curtain,” where all countries and lands of Orthodox Christianity (except Greece, of course...), but including Bulgaria (and his hostility toward it cannot go unnoticed), belonged to Eastern Europe. The latter has nothing in common with the Western culture, whereas Central Europe experienced the tragedy of being cut off from its origins. What is deeply striking in Kundera’s attitude is: first, his lack of recognition (of willingness to admit?) how rich and complex were, for example, the historical relations of Poland with Ukraine and Belarus, and that in this region the line of demarcation between Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism cannot be so easily drawn; and second, he did not even notice how easily he forgot about the Baltic states. From the perspective of his essay everything would look nice and tidy if the Eastern borders of Europe were to be moved just a bit East to liberate Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Then there would be: liberated Central Europe (in fact, thoroughly Western) and on other side, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union (including Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine). Of course, he showed his empathy for other nations subordinated to Soviet Russia with a very dramatic cry concerning the fact that almost nobody in the world noticed that due to Russian policy, the Ukrainian nation was on the verge of cultural extinction. But it did not seem to have any impact on his clear and elegant cultural geography. See Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe.”

29) For more on ancient relevant considerations see for example Roller, *Eratothenes’ Geography*; Kidd (ed.), *Posidonius*.

Europe during the sixteenth century) – *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis Asiana et Europiana*<sup>30</sup> [*Treatise on the Two Sarmatias, Asian and European*] – he was doing basically two things in the field of (cultural) geography. He was promoting a foundational myth of Sarmatians (radically different from the barbarian creatures which haunted and filled the representatives of the Enlightenment with irresistible terror), as brave and noble ancestors of Polish noblemen. But he was also providing further support for the still dominant division of Europe and Asia at the Don River. He was distinguishing “European Sarmatia” (roughly from the lands slightly westward from the Vistula River to the Don) and “Asian Sarmatia” (from the Don to the lands around the Caspian Sea). This example clearly shows that while looking for geographical criteria to distinguish between Europe and Asia, one can eventually turn to cultural categories and political motivations and purposes.

It becomes even more visible when we realize that (after some more or less, rather less, successful attempts at moving the boundaries from the Don to the Volga River) it was a geographer of tsar Peter the Great – Vasilii Tatishchev<sup>31</sup> – who in the name of the political interests of the Russian Empire worked out a set of criteria to move these boundaries to the Ural Mountains. It still took some time to recognize this extension of Europe, and it eventually, after many desperate political and financial efforts of Catherine II the Great, was acknowledged in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The political-cultural motivations were also active behind another interesting colonialist project implied by the celebrated term *Mitteleuropa*. As it is well known, the term was to express German aspirations for cultural colonization of the lands lying geographically in the middle of Europe. The term itself was coined by German historian Joseph Partsch in 1903 in his book originally published in New York and entitled *Central Europe*;<sup>32</sup> a year later it was published in German. In 1915 Friedrich Naumann published the book under the very same title,<sup>33</sup> where the category was used explicitly as a theoretical foundation and legitimization for German expansionism to the east and southeast. The category of *Mitteleuropa* eventually went beyond simple associations with German expansionism. One of the explicit theoretical implications of this category is that it indicates that Germany occupies a distinctive, central, position on the continent. It also indicates a certain sphere of in-betweenness (see my remarks on Hegel above), of lands lying between Germany and Russia (supposedly belonging to Europe).

This latter implication became a source of inspiration for many interesting classifications, divisions, and conceptualizations of Europe as essentially consisting of different parts. Perhaps the most canonical one was that provided by the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs dividing Europe into three main parts: Western, Central-Eastern, and Eastern.<sup>34</sup> Without going into a detailed analysis, the author’s criteria for such a division were not purely religious, economic, nor political (and this is certainly the advantage of this theory); though of course, these factors played significant roles. However, much more important was how all these factors were incorporated, so to speak, into an interplay of society, state structures, and political power (sovereign) – leading (or not) to the creation and cultivation of a European civic *ethos*. Eastern Europe, identified here simply with Russia, had one-sidedly subordinated the first two (society and state structures) to the absolutist rule of tsars. In this way all other aspects of cultural life (like the status of religion, of social classes including aristocracy, or economy), were dependent on the will of a single center of power. Western Europe, starting from the second half of the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century (mainly because of the dynamic

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30) de Miechow, *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis Asiana et Europiana*.

31) Taking note that at the same time Swedish geographer Philipp Johann von Strahlenberg, on the basis of apparently objective geographical criteria, proposed the same line of demarcation; the question of who was influencing whom (whether and why) is open.

32) See Partsch, *Central Europe*.

33) See Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*.

34) Szűcs, *The Three Historical Regions of Europe*.

development of the cities), was developing societies capable of taking autonomous role – not fully subordinated to a sovereign, not identified with state structures – and that was in spite of an absolutist model of monarchy (the only exception here was Prussia tending more toward an Eastern model). Central-Eastern Europe, in fact, had started as part of the Western sphere – with, for example, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth being in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries among only a few republics in the continent: intellectually vibrant, vividly appropriating the ideals of the Renaissance, and open to the Reformation (just as Bohemia and, up to a certain moment Hungary). Due to external dangers (like in case of Hungary being successfully invaded by the Ottoman Empire), and/or eastward expansion connected with the reification of the old-feudal economic system leading eventually to the partitions (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) – Central-Eastern Europe was more and more prone to different forms (and in different times to different degrees) of contamination of the initially appropriated Western model by Eastern influences. In this way it has become a zone in-between West and East.<sup>35</sup>

The very interesting, and original contribution to all cultural divisions of Europe was that of Oskar Halecki – a Polish emigratory historian (active between 1940s and 1960s). He claimed that the tripartite division of Europe is inadequate since there is a distinctive, if not fundamental difference between Central-Eastern Europe and Central-Western Europe. The latter, in a sense, indicates the sphere of influence of the German world (and as such somehow coincides with the category of *Mitteleuropa*) – to be clearly distinguished from Western Europe. The former indicates all lands situated between Germany and Russia. He claimed that the distinctive features of this sphere were: creative co-existence of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity (a fact so often overlooked – see my remark above), close co-existence of different ethnicities, and the existence of the quite numerous nations and ethnicities which did not create national states. He also underscored a relative dominance of Slavs within this part of Europe. Even though Halecki maintained the category of Eastern Europe as reserved to Russia, at the same time he had some strong inclinations to claim that, in fact, Russia should not be counted as part of Europe.<sup>36</sup>

It seems that the multiplicity of the contemporary distinctions, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, simply misses the *essence* of the phenomenon in question; and the proper way of approaching it is not through a one-sided perspective, or a single set of criteria – whether economic, political, or (oversimplified) religious. It seems that a much more promising way – as it was shown in the two above examples – goes through a cultural, and cultural-historical perspective. This kind of perspective should be guided by the two simple and old questions: What is Europe? And: What does this adjective “Eastern,” overburdened with meanings, really mean? As already mentioned, the way these questions are answered, explicitly or implicitly, may determine our cultural cartographies; and cultural cartographies may decide, however trivial it may sound, the fate of the peoples and nations. The task is to address these questions from the perspective of philosophy of culture.<sup>37</sup>

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35) Masłowski, *Mity i symbole polityczne Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 23–29.

36) See Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization*; Halecki, “The Historical Role of Central-Eastern Europe.”

37) Two remarks should be made here: first, within the scope of this essay, as already mentioned, only possible, tentative ways of answering them can be proposed. This essay is just a first modest step in this direction. Second, philosophy of culture does not mean some philosophical sub-discipline with a clearly (more or less) delineated objective field of cognitive interests. Philosophy of culture is understood here as general philosophical reflection on all processes of meaning-making. In this sense it takes forms of genealogy and archeology, of different social-historical actualities, and the corresponding experiential fields within which humans (being also parts of those actualities) are to orient themselves. Thus, it also takes a form of axiological hermeneutics, which tries to uncover and project values playing an orientational role. For different ways of understanding philosophy of culture and its different applications see Bursztyka, Karmer, Rychter, and Auxier eds., *Philosophy of Culture as Theory, Method, and Way of Life*; Rosińska, “Wstęp”; Okopień, “Tezy o ontologii kultury.”



There were already countless answers to the first of the abovementioned questions. In this essay there is no space to provide a list of even the most insightful or most important ones. Neither is there room for some sort of synopsis of these answers. Therefore, I will limit myself to a few remarks that are, in the present context, philosophically the most important. From the philosophical perspective Europe is not simply a (sub-)continent; neither it is a conglomerate of (nation-)states joined in different ways, and to different degrees (depending on the particular historical epoch). Above all else Europe is a specific cultural project constantly actualized and re-actualized throughout its long history. As such it is *essentially* historical, dynamic, pluralistic, unfinished, open-ended, and self-reflective.<sup>38</sup> Its *eidos*, as Edmund Husserl would put it, is not fixed, but rather presents itself through multiplicity of forms and shapes. It actualizes itself within different historically determined factualities. The openness and unfinished character of the European project has always been at once a source of its strength and fragility. It has been deciding about its vitality and creative nature, but also about its susceptibility to falling into different forms of crises, to dangerous dogmatisms, and to deadly, horrific conflicts. The European project is tensive. It was born out of, and maintained within, a spirit of dispute (and clash) between different perspectives on how reality can and should be understood, cognized, and arranged. In this sense it has been open to constant self-revision and modification. As Leszek Kołakowski put it, its strength has always lied in its capacity for self-questioning, self-critique, self-doubting,<sup>39</sup> of correcting any views or dogmas whenever they lose their sources of legitimization. It was founded on the ancient imperative of self-knowledge which, because of the finite character of humans and their world(s), was from the very beginning determined as always partial, revisable, and limited. This imperative of searching for cognition, which is to be identical with self-cognition, was meant to be realized from within, and for the sake of, but often (whenever necessary) against the limits of a community.

It is from within such an intellectual-spiritual landscape that the foundational ideals of Europe were created. What is emblematic is they are at once foundational and founded, grounding and grounded. They were not given by some supreme authority, but rather were the effect of the relentless cultural effort of making reality more humane. Furthermore, they were not only open to pluralistic interpretations, but also related to their, so to speak, counterparts. It seems that among these ideals the most crucial are:

### 1) *Rationality* –

Which had been born already in Ancient Greece as a general attitude of questioning of reality (both physical and human), of searching for its causes (including the ultimate ones), of projecting an order unto an original chaos, and of self-reflection. But this rationality is/should not be univocal, a single rationality. The European project created different types of rationality (e.g., theoretical, practical, instrumental, artistic), but also different, historically and locally determined rationalities. The moment a single rationality gained uncontested dominance over other rationalities, European culture verges on the edge of barbarism.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, rationality in the course of European history has been constantly confronted with its positive and negative counterparts. It had originally emerged (in the form of philosophy) from mythical thinking (and mytho-poetic imagination) and, as many claim, it cannot<sup>41</sup> and should not<sup>42</sup> get rid of this affinity if the vital, creative, and pluralistic

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38) Cf. Rosińska, "W poszukiwaniu europejskości," 105.

39) Kołakowski, "Szukanie barbarzyńcy," 11–24.

40) Husserl, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* ("The Vienna Lecture").

41) Barthes, *Mythologies*.

42) Rosińska, "W poszukiwaniu europejskości"; Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*; Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense."

character of European culture is to be preserved. However, this relation must be kept in a state of equilibrium – mythical imagination can very quickly displace any rationality and lead to the reign of an unlimited, and often highly dangerous, irrationality. There is also a creative tension – for the first time radically articulated by the *Enlightenment* – between reason and religion. Rationality has its own limitations. They appear whenever the human mind is confronted with phenomena of the physical or human world for which it cannot find any explanation, cannot give them any meaning, phenomena which by their excess can cause either wonder or terror (or both like in the case of the sublime) – it is in these moments when rationality must leave space for meta-rationality. Meta-rationality does not look for logical explanations, neither does it resign from an effort of understanding, of uncovering a meaning even where human intellect cannot see any. As such, meta-rationality is essentially axiological – it is driven not only by a search for truth, but also by pursuit of good.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, it is not something opposed to rationality, but rather indicates its ultimate truth.

## 2) *Individual Subjectivity* –

Whose very idea had appeared in its first cultural articulation together with the rise of rationality (in Ancient Greece implicitly, and then it was explicitly articulated, further developed, promoted, and fostered by Christianity) and as essentially related to it. This ideal also underwent its own transformations, reconfigurations, and its ups and downs – especially when it comes to its legal dimension – let alone the embarrassing fact that for the most part of European history such a status was not (at least on the social-political level) granted to all human beings. In fact, for centuries it was granted to a radically small minority of the population, only gradually extending to encompass larger and larger groups. Whatever were its limitations it has been understood, at least since early modernity, as a personal structure belonging to and at the same time transcending subject (in its purely formal or logical character). Thus, an individual has been conceived in terms of dignity, moral autonomy, and ethical agency – as a rational, that is, responsible agent, which can give a comprehensible account for what they do. Such an account presupposes that the subject asserts itself over against society,<sup>44</sup> and as such there is a fundamental tension already involved. But it also, and more importantly, presupposes that it is from the very beginning – precisely as individualized subjectivity – one among many; it is essentially being-with-others. And this already presupposes the possibility of shared meanings and experiences, an ability of experiencing empathy, compassion,<sup>45</sup> and solidarity; a capacity for standing up with the others and standing in place of the other: even if that would require paying the highest possible price.<sup>46</sup> One can say that the ultimate truth of an individual subjectivity, as its ideal has been developing throughout history, lies in this possibility for transgression. However, everyone is well aware of the negative counterexamples of such transgressions taking place in the darkest moments of European history, when people-standing-together were doing the most horrific things on someone else orders. This shows us that an individual subjectivity is a fragile, dynamic structure which is always capable of intellectual, moral, and spiritual development, but also of a sudden disruption when irrational dark motives take precedence over a pursuit for ethical excellence.

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43) The term “meta-rationality” was coined by the Polish philosopher Władysław Stróżewski. See Stróżewski, “Racjonalizm i meta-racjonalizm,” 421.

44) It is already visible in the philosophical concept of the subject by Rene Descartes, where self-assertion of the subject is practically equal of falling into solipsism. For Max Stirner if an individual is responsible at all, they are so only and exclusively before themselves. In Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the subject can be responsible before others only if they can be first (phenomenologically, not chronologically) genuinely responsible before themselves.

45) As Zofia Rosińska shows, an ability to experience compassion is one of the distinctive features of European culture, a feature preceding even Christianity. The first testimonies of that one can find already in Homer. Rosińska, “W poszukiwaniu europejskości,” 106–107.

46) See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

### 3) *Democracy* –

Rooted obviously in the ancient Greek model, and understood as a rule of law, that is: a community of free and equal individuals capable of self-governance through transparent state-structures representing their will and respecting their dignity. It is true, and trivial, to say that for the most part of European history this ideal more than any other had a regulative rather than actual character, that it had its dramatic ups and downs, and its strict limitations; most of the historical examples to which we can refer are, at best, examples of proto-democracy. It is also true that after its supposedly “golden age” in ancient Athens it was for a long time forgotten.<sup>47</sup> However, it is also true that the history of the European project is, in a sense, a history of an evolution and development of the democratic *ethos* within a framework of the state, with its institutions, and the rule of law; this is paralleled by the gradual evolution and development of the idea that society is to consist of equal individuals who, taken together as a people, are meant to be a real, collective sovereign. This idea makes democracy the fulfillment of the abovementioned spirit of the European project – of culture based on a dispute between different perspectives and horizons of meaning. The strength can be the weakness: representative bodies, and state-structures can (in fact they often do) alienate themselves from the people. That is why there is no genuine democracy without:

### 4) *Civil society* –

Understood in the normative sense as a readiness of people to undertake – on the basis of communal ties built upon a common trust and shared system of values (social capital<sup>48</sup>) – joint social initiatives whenever and wherever state-structures cannot provide relevant solutions. In more radical cases (and on the macro-scale), the undertaking a complete initiative of self-governance, whenever state-structures radically act against the people they were meant to represent. Without civil society democratic *ethos* would be deprived of one of its fundamental instruments and guardians, that is, civil disobedience: the potential for dissent. The ideal of civil society had its first cultural articulations in different types of *communitas* (municipal, rural, monastic, academic – *universitas*), in the late medieval and early modern Christian Europe.<sup>49</sup> Even if the scope of activity and impact of these communities was quite limited, they provided the first models for social self-organization and active social participation within the feudal landscape; models which can be to a large extent distinguished from what one would call today political society (already somehow conceptualized in ancient times by Aristotle). In philosophical terms, civil society as a structure fully separate from political state, that is not reducible, in any way to being just a simple supplement to state-structures, was first described by Hegel.<sup>50</sup> Civil society is not – as the history of European project has shown – something just being-there, operating constantly in a straightforward, natural way. It is not any kind of a subsisting collective subject. In its inherently regulative, normative character it is to be understood as a readiness of people to stand together, to collectively take part in whatever must be done in the name of the common good. This readiness, as mentioned above, rests on a fundamental trust (experienced spontaneously, sometimes against all odds) – “If I would stand for you, you would stand up with me, you would back me up!” The whole European project is inherently axiological and normative, but it seems it is nowhere to be more visible than here.

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47) Except the fact that this time was not as long as would usually be assumed; it was certainly present in its full form among the early Slavic tribes of Sclaveni and Antes already around the sixth century. See Plokhly, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, 15–16.

48) Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*.

49) See for example Kłoczowski, *Europa: Chrześcijańskie korzenie*, 60–84 especially 76–82.

50) See Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

Having provided the basic cultural coordinates for Europe as a “territory” we can turn to the second question about the meaning of the adjective “Eastern.” It seems that the provisional answer should not be very problematic: The adjective must indicate these lands beyond which, while moving eastward one can no longer speak of Europe; everything situated East of such lands cannot be counted as belonging to the community joined by and built upon the above-described *ethos* of the European project and its leading ideals. The space where they can appear from time to time, but always with a strictly limited validity and radiance, and in a radically distorted and superficial way; more as a means of manipulation and illusion than something genuinely experienced, something genuinely expressing the *ethos* (if there is any) of that space, cannot be seen as belonging to Europe. Eastern borders of Europe<sup>51</sup> are constituted by the meandering line between Narva on the North and Novoazovsk on the South, but it should be also supplemented by the line between the small fishing village Nowa Karczma and the point called Wisztyniec – the line constituting the state border between East-North of Poland and Królewiec/Karaliaučius/Kēnigsberga Oblast (formerly known as Kaliningrad Oblast). These two lines taken together constitute the state borders of six European countries, and as such, the limits (in a strong sense of *non plus ultra*) of Europe. To put it explicitly, to put it bluntly:

*Russia is not, and never was, a part of Europe.*<sup>52</sup>

This point, after two centuries of a commonly recognized status quo (i.e., a recognition of, at least partial belonging of Russia to Europe), can provoke doubts, or can simply sound like an over-affective response to the current political events. One can often hear questions like: “Should (or can we) exclude Russia from Europe only because it has launched the brutal, genocidal war against Ukraine?” To that our only answer could be: “Of course, not!” But a more correct response to such questions would take a form of a question: “What does the actuality (and even possibility) of the brutal Russian war against Ukraine actually tell us about Russia itself?”

This way we make a subtle shift from the war itself to the war as a symptom. Since behind the official agenda, official institutions, official information, official reasons, official lies, official actions, revealed and not-yet-revealed (and those still to come) atrocities, we can see contours of the same perennial pattern, the same trans-historical truth. Russia as a cultural project, as a cultural formation, in all its “historical” forms and guises, relentlessly actualizes – however paradoxical it may sound – its own nothingness. *There is nothing positive in this project – it is pure appearance, pure semblance.* What determines it ontologically and axiologically is a peculiar lack of any specific contours, any specific virtues, any limitations.<sup>53</sup> It leads to a more general point, which can be expressed in the Hegelian idiom – *Russia, as a cultural formation, is devoid of ethical substance.* This can be expressed in more concrete terms as the Russian characteristic lack of respect for state-structures and legal rules (servile passivity is not respect in the ethical sense), a lack of mutual respect to each other, and a lack of respect for themselves. All of this is often put under the more general category of servile passivity, which from time to time is accom-

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51) It should be made clear – what is meant here is about Eastern borders, not South-Eastern nor North-Eastern. And in this sense, there is no intention here to exclude the countries aspiring to European membership (some Caucasian states) nor those clearly belonging to it (Finland).

52) At this moment the thesis is not very original. It was expressed for example by the prominent French historian Francois Hartog in his short article “Rosja nie jest i nigdy nie była częścią Europy.” Hartog claims that the criterion of excluding Russia from Europe is clearly not about the war against Ukraine and its brutality – Russia has simply never developed cultural patterns typical of the European identity.

53) “Russia has no limits!” This celebrated phrase of the pandits of Russian propaganda is very emblematic. It is joyfully repeated by Russian masses in the state of pseudo-sobriety, without even the slightest reflection what kind of implications this slogan can have (and actually does have) for their lives, including their mere physical existence.

panied by sudden eruptions of uncontrollable aggressiveness; or as German-Latvian phenomenologist Kurt Stavenhagen put it – it is about the essential lack of ethical self-reliance or “weakness” of the Russian self, about its inability to have a genuine experience of values.<sup>54</sup> This characteristic has far-reaching consequences internal as well as external. First, the lack of self-reliance provides the basis and motivation for all internal politics where systemic lies, propaganda, and severe oppression serve as basic principles, and constitute a kind of vicious circle – the more they are applied, the more they are needed. Second, if one cannot create values from within their own group then one is forced to look for them outside.<sup>55</sup> Third, the problem appears when one is unable to also appropriate these external values; such situation can lead to truly unbearable condition, which one wishes to overcome at every price: the condition in which nothingness becomes the only content of one’s self-experience. Fourth, there are two parallel ways of such an overcoming: the first one, to create an illusionary, mythical veil of grandeur – “True, our condition is unbearable, but we are: the greatest (super-)ethnos; we inhabit the biggest country; our souls are wide and loving; we were blessed by Christ, who Himself had travelled Russia from West to East, from North to South; we are the Third Rome; we (and only we) are capable of bringing a loving liberation to all oppressed, and so forth.” Needless to say, that each of these imaginary constructs serves, in advance, as a ready-made reason to justify whatever misdeed could be committed. The second way of such an overcoming is an open hostility toward all externality,<sup>56</sup> which is a reminder that the project of appropriating external values has failed. Now, the new strategy is to be applied: internal oppression must be externalized, and in the name of one’s “greatness,” one’s neighbors must be “consumed” and subordinated to the same rule of un-law.

The point of arrival of such a process – obviously presented here in a slightly simplified way – is the creation of particular “ethos,” Russianness. The latter is usually expressed in the sublime tones of a capacity of creative inclusion of all ethnicities, and more broadly, cultural formations situating themselves (or in most cases being situated in advance by their “consumer,” regardless of their will of self-determination), on the margins of Western culture guided by an apparently oppressive, highly intolerant, and one-sided model of rationality.<sup>57</sup>

Probably the first explicit formulation of this model can be found in Dostoyevsky. There, the Russian nation is defined by its “genius,” expressing the idea of an all-human community driven by genuine brotherly love, a “genius” capable of forgiving hostility, seeing and forgiving otherness, capable of reconciling contradictions – in short, a capacity of loving embrace of all otherness.<sup>58</sup> All of this due to the simple fact: Russian people are the only people capable of a genuine, that is, naïve, pure, and honest living through Christian ideals and the Truth they provide. It is almost impossible to find an example of a more sophisticated justification for imperialism and expansionism.<sup>59</sup> Those who had been unfortunate enough to experience such “a loving embrace” of the Russian world know all too well how horrific and inhumane a reality stands behind phrases like “reconciliation of contradictions.” Only these peoples (e.g., Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, all the peoples of the Caucasus, the countless nations and ethnicities of Central and Eastern Asia,

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54) For interesting analysis of the Russian world in Max Scheler and Kurt Stavenhagen see Gniazdowski, “State at War.” It is striking how much the works of Scheler and Stavenhagen, published over a century ago, remain actual.

55) See *ibid.*, 115.

56) One of the best examples of such a perverse logic one can find in philosophy of Ivan Kireyevsky. See Besançon, *Święta Ruś*, 70–75, especially 74.

57) For a very interesting critique of this way of thinking presented by the contemporary Russian thinker Andrei Smirnov see Raikhert, “The Logics of Sense and the Russian-Ukrainian War.”

58) See Dostoyevsky, *Pushkin Speech*.

59) And Dostoyevsky himself was fully aware of this while explicitly expressing his repulsion to Poles, or enthusiastically celebrating (a couple of days before his death) an extremely brutal and bloody defeat of one of the last points of Turkmenistan’s dramatic resistance against Russian “loving embrace.”



and in the second half of the twentieth century many Central European nations), understand that to become a part of a cultural entity, which is deprived of its own *eidos*, can only mean to be condemned to all possible processes of levelling down their potential, to be arrested on different stages of underdevelopment (political, social, ethical – in general, cultural): “We cannot make you as we are, since, honestly speaking, we don’t know who we are. But we will neither let you die out, nor let you flourish! Your condition is to suffer, and your only task is to try to survive!” Russianness was supposed to mean – in the words of its mistaken prophets and proponents – pluralism of different *eide* in their whole richness and historical actualizations (perhaps meant as bound together by a kind of meta-*eidos*). In fact, it has always been nothing more than just a magma of different cultural influences joined by a forcefully implemented Russian language, imperialistic means of power, and forever frozen in a mythical circle of a-historicity.

I mentioned above four ideals, which are fundamental for the European project. Can they be to any reasonable degree applied to Russia, even if we assume their regulative character?

a. *Rationality* –

There is no doubt that this category was always a very special target of Russian thinkers, writers, and poets. Most of them claimed openly and explicitly, often with a tone of hostility, that rational *logos* is an inferior form of human relatedness to reality, and as such it does not deserve much respect. Reason divides, separates, introduces differences, where one should recognize and contemplate unity – in both social reality and within the relation between the human world and super-natural, divine reality. While rationality individuates, true wisdom unites and helps to live in a community. This attitude is obviously grounded in the Byzantine religious and philosophical tradition (e.g., Gregory Palamas) underscoring the uselessness of human reason for cognition of the ultimate reality. The way this tradition was appropriated in Muscovy had far-reaching consequences for the Russian version of Orthodox Christianity, and as a consequence, for the shape of its ethical-social realm. What is characteristic for the former is a very special status of sacred images – icons, whose contemplation during a properly conducted liturgy can be a source of almost mystical elevation, when a believer enters a state of unity with the divine reality. Having such a specific religious “shortcut” at their disposal, the Russian Orthodox Church did not pay any special attention to practical teaching, to shaping ethical frameworks for their believers. If one can experience mystical communion with the supernatural reality almost directly, and by implication a mysterious communion with their fellow believers, then the sphere of everyday concerns, and of practical interactions with neighbors is not only devoid of any special importance – there is no clear connection between these two spheres. Such a perspective can and does have truly disastrous consequences for the social sphere, for practical dealings with reality, and most importantly for ethical acts.<sup>60</sup> It also has consequences for the sphere of cognition and self-cognition. It seems that from whatever I wrote about rationality in the context of the European project only meta-rationality can find any application here – however, it is a very limited and highly distorted application. The sphere of trivial evidence, of intersubjectively verifiable facts which can serve as a basis for truthful judgements, is not highly valued in Russian culture. This kind of truth is like very little, almost nothing in comparison with Truth – *Pravda*<sup>61</sup> – mysterious, mystical, accessible only for those who “see more,” those trained in “integral cognition.” This kind of truth, having its origins in the theological sphere outlined above, could and did have different holders and guardians – God, History, the Secretary of the Communist Party, the “President”. The most important thing is that its very idea can always

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60) See Besançon, *Święta Ruś*, 33–35.

61) See *ibid.*, 36.

be used for all tricks of propaganda, for all kinds of lies, for producing all kinds of logical contradictions, and for accusing potential adversaries (and/or enemies – either external or internal) of being limited to a narrow, mundane, profane, and disgustingly rational worldview.<sup>62</sup> *Pravda* is accessible only for those who truly believe, and those who truly believe must believe in Russia, as the permanent holder of *Pravda*. Thus, reason has no power there, and it cannot be used to think about Russia, or analyze it either, from without or from within. “You will not comprehend it with your mind, ... you can only believe in Russia” (Fyodor Tyutchev). With such a claim, nothing should come as a surprise...<sup>63</sup>

b. The ideal of *Individual Subjectivity* –

In a sense laid down with regard to the European project as a rational, granted with inherent dignity, autonomous agent – has quite obvious limitations. These limitations seem to be of three kinds: 1) phenomenological; 2) legal; and 3) cultural (in a broad sense comprising also the previous two). From the phenomenological perspective, if a person is living in a culture which devalues rationality, they cannot develop a proper sense of self-responsibility – understood as a capacity for giving a comprehensible account of what one does. Instead, they can always appeal, guided by their superiors, to *Pravda*, which requires “x” or “y” to be done. This seems to lead to a lack of self-reliance, which is one of the sources of instability of the Russian character – of a constant balancing between servile obedience and transgression, inexplicable aggressiveness and radical repentance, spectacular arrogance and debilitating shame, and so forth. From the legal perspective since the rise of the Great Duchy of Muscovy, through the era of the Soviet Union, to the current moment, the legal value of an individual has always been almost null. Obviously there have been some gradations here based on the social-political background of an individual, their economic status, ethnicity, or during a particular historical period; but none of these were really fundamental. Legally speaking, individuals were always radically subordinated to the arbitrary will of the guardians of *Pravda*. The inhumane and persistent reality of gulags (nowadays taking the more “civilized” name of penal colonies) is the best and most horrific confirmation of that. On the superficial level – Russian culture obviously created a concept of an individual who is granted basic rights, and is capable of acting and suffering – almost exactly as *dictated* by the civilization of Enlightenment, but on the level of the real social-political praxis a genuine confirmation of this has not been found; all except for, perhaps suffering, which nobody doubts.

c. *Democracy* –

Having appeared, around the end of the fourteenth century, from the darkness of the Mongol occupation (lasting over two centuries), Muscovy had developed a radically persistent and highly developed model of autocracy. The model was allergic to any democratic movements and political forms even in the neighboring territories. There was once, within the circle of Russian civilization, a political organism which could serve as a basis for a potentially democratic tradition – the Novgorod Republic. However, it was quite quickly annexed by Muscovy (1478) and then completely destroyed with the mass killing of almost the whole population (the “massacre of

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62) For how some of the leading contemporary Russian thinkers cynically play between a reference to this old tradition, of mystical *Pravda* and European (Western) ideals of rationality whenever it fits their purposes, see Raikhert, “The Logics of Sense and the Russian-Ukrainian War.”

63) For an excellent analysis of how this old traditional model, purified from its theological/religious aspects, in contemporary Russian culture leads to a complete inability to think critically, of exercising the power of judgment, and to the further atrophy of the social sphere see Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*.

Novgorod”), on the orders of tsar Ivan the Terrible (1570). In 1832 Sergei Uvarov – the minister of education in the court of tsar Nicholas I – had proposed to recognize autocracy as one of the three pillars of Russian culture; and it must be admitted that since then it has remained an uncontested rule of Russian politics. It is true that after the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a certain social commotion which could have led to democratization, but it ended in October 1993 when the tanks following the orders of President Boris Yeltsin shot the Russian Parliament, killing many of his political adversaries. After that event many independent organizations were shut down, all adversaries were called “fascist”<sup>64</sup> and penalized, and the referendum for a new constitution, which strongly empowered the presidential position, was successfully passed in December of the same year. What is most emblematic is not so much the event itself (although it strongly speaks for itself), but how the draft of the new constitution giving, in fact, almost autocratic power to Yeltsin was commented on by himself shortly before the referendum:

I won't deny it, the powers of the president in the draft are considerable indeed. And what do you want? In a country that has got used to tsars or chiefs; a country in which well-defined interest groups have not coalesced, and their leaders have not been determined, in which normal parties are barely embryonic; a country in which executive discipline is exceedingly weak, where nihilism with regard to the law is completely rampant – in such a country, could one bet only or mainly on parliament? In half a year, if not sooner, the people are sure to demand a dictator. Such a dictator will be found quickly, I assure you. And perhaps in that very parliament.<sup>65</sup>

What is striking in these words is, first, how easily autocracy is, in Russian context, presented as a defense against dictatorship (!); and second, a complete disbelief in a democratic potential of Russian people, and their inability to establish civil society. Of course, here it could be simply a cynical justification of Yeltsin's political interest. But it is well known what the course of events was to come up until today and what models – including a truly theatrical one called “sovereign democracy,”<sup>66</sup> consequent elimination, by using “salami tactics,” of any opponents (regardless of their status – political, social, economic), prohibition of all pro-democratic organizations and media, prohibition of any comments which would not be in a complete agreement with the “President's” opinions. Before searching for too simple excuses for Russians, as supposedly not responsible for the current political events, and claiming that there was nothing they could have done to prevent it since they were first innocent victims of the political regime – it is good to remember that this regime did not appear out of the blue. It is simply yet another guise of the traditional Russian rule of un-law, so visibly hidden behind an imitation of certain elements of European models, and institutions. All of these guises – including the current one – were possible since:

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64) It is striking how universal this strategy has become in Russian policy, where everyone opposing the official political line of Kremlin can be simply accused of being a “fascist” (or a “nazi”) and be subject to penalization, or even elimination. Furthermore, this policy has been extended to foreign politics, where a label “nazi” can be so easily used in reference to everyone who dares to oppose Russia's political interests. This is so clearly visible in Russian policy toward Ukraine, where first it was used only in relation to President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian government, which stood on the way to the “reunification” of Russian and Ukrainian nations. That is why according to the Kremlin they should be physically eliminated for the sake of *Pravda*. When it has appeared that they express the will of the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population, Russian propaganda has started to use this label in reference to the whole Ukrainian nation. This has become the foundation for the genocidal war against Ukraine. For more on that see Riabchuk, “Calling a Spade a Spade.”

65) Boris Yeltsin, “Prezident Rossii otvechaet na voprosy gazety ‘Izvestiia,’” *Izvestiia*, November 16, 1993; after Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 40.

66) Interestingly, it was arranged, on Putin's orders, by a former director of puppetry theatre – Vladislav Surkov.

#### d. *Civil Society*

Russians have never been able to create even an embryonic form of *civil society*, to establish an *ethos* of self-governance, to stand up, nor to undertake an initiative in either a micro- or macro-scale. There is a famous myth of supposedly prehistoric rural communities bound by organic ties (meaning genuinely democratic), and common interests, which could have been a real and solid social foundation for a democratic and just Russian society in the future.<sup>67</sup> The only problem: this myth did not pass the test of historical verification – the so called *obshchina* or *mir* was neither prehistoric, nor even democratic in its origins, but rather feudal. The whole idea of these “communities” was to be situated within the context of extremely severe serfdom, where small tracts of land and forest were left for peasants as the only means for their physical survival in the brutal feudal reality.<sup>68</sup> True, over the last three decades there have been many grassroots initiatives, projects, independent media, dissident movements – all of them taking this or that form of resistance, all of them trying to present a different view on reality, and to promote a kind of pluralism. The problem is that all of them had very limited impact on Russian society. There are obvious reasons for this; Russian society is devoid of, so to speak, pre-cultural frameworks for these kinds of messages. There is no social capital there – no basic trans-generational ties of trust and solidarity, (i.e., comprising all classes and groups, including at least to some extent different ethnicities). It is not only the case that such capital was destroyed by Sovietism – as it was the case in many European countries once subordinated to the Soviet rule – it is an effect of centuries of uncontested autocratic rule. In order to be efficient, it needed to have permanently conducted two social-operations: 1) the maintenance of a vertical societal structure (on all possible levels including race), reinforced by informal relations of power and the use of violence (symbolic as well as physical), and 2) the introduction of distrust and suspicion amongst the people.

### 3. What Is Eastern Europe?

In this perspective what is provisionally understood as Eastern Europe includes the countries constituting the Eastern borders of Europe. That is, countries that for centuries and until today have been constantly confronted with the paradoxical cultural formation that poses a constant deadly threat to all neighboring states and ethnicities, a non-being that is neither European nor Asian,<sup>69</sup> and not even a coherent synthesis of the two. However, this is just a negative determination. The question now is whether it can be complemented with any positive determination. In other words: Is the adjective “Eastern” just a post-colonialist curse, a shameful label indicating a miserable cultural condition from which one must emerge as if from the state of (induced or self-induced) immaturity? Or is there some positive content that can be ascribed to it, and in this way culturally rehabilitate it?

Here, the provisionally named Eastern Europe somehow coincides with all the lands, peoples, and ethnicities that were either a part of (for a longer or shorter period of time), what was once called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or those that maintain vital, creative, cultural relations with it (e.g., Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus). However, it should be strongly underscored that the Commonwealth has here the status of a certain historical-cultural point of reference, one which should not be absolutized. The cultural space is constituted here by different points of reference, and by different narrative frameworks. So, I want to simply

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67) See von Haxthausen, *Studies on the Interior of Russia*.

68) See Grant, “‘Obshchina’ and ‘mir’.”

69) The view that – the Russian people are neither purely European, nor purely Asiatic, not even a smooth and coherent synthesis of the two (and therefore: “The unexpected is always to be expected from them.”) – is not novel. It was expressed already over a century ago by... a Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 1–2.

see it as a particular model for creating fundamental ideals and values (but also tensions characteristic of this cultural-geographical space). They were to a large extent an appropriation of European ideals. Cultural appropriation is always a creative act – that is, what is appropriated is always situated in the context of local peculiarities, which infuse it with specific contours and colors. It should be admitted that in many respects this appropriation took exceptional forms – developing attitudes, habits, and creating the social-political, and more broadly cultural, landscape(s), which had no equivalent at the time. The dramatic, long-lasting confrontation with Russian imperialism (first in the form of the tsarist despotism and the Russian Empire, then as the Soviet Union), led eventually at the very least to a large degree of destruction of this cultural legacy. And so, the contemporary history of Eastern Europe is, in the present view, a spectacular odyssey in which the peoples of these lands made their uneasy way back to their European home – from which they had been evicted.

In the preceding section there was reference to the four fundamental ideals of the European project, which served as cultural coordinates. Here, there will not be a simplistic transposition only to check whether or not they fit. Rather, it will be shown how they have been constantly operative within the space delineated by more specific coordinates.

### *Ethos*

Eastern Europe (again, in the provisional understanding), originated in pre-modern times (if not earlier) permeated by the ideal of civil freedom. The political project of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Ruthenian noblemen (with a contribution of Livonian, for a short period of time), the establishing of a democratic (proto-)republic in the sixteenth century, was something exceptional for the time. And it was so, especially as to: the form of the state (long lasting union, first personal then real, of the two states – Poland and Lithuania); the form of government (a mixture of three bodies: the king, the senate, and the house of representatives); the strong accent on the republican character of the state (with Venezia being the closest comparable model);<sup>70</sup> and its inclusive character. The beneficiaries of this political system belonged to just one social class – the gentry – which had evolved into a pre-modern political nation. The inclusive character of this nation was expressed in that the criteria of belonging to it were neither of economic, nor ethnic, linguistic, nor even religious (within the limits of Christianity) nature. In this sense, a member of this polity could be, for example, of Lithuanian origins, speaking Polish in the public sphere and Ruthenian in his household, being a Protestant or Orthodox by religion, and economically being much poorer than many representatives of the burgesses in his region<sup>71</sup> (and in some cases even poorer than some peasants<sup>72</sup>).<sup>73</sup> The only criterion was belonging to the gentry and sharing its *ethos* as articulated in specific virtues and values. Among the latter the most important were freedom and the common good; these two were somehow inseparable – since freedom was understood (before its political practice degenerated into a form of anarchy) not in the negative terms, but precisely as freedom for active participation in the political life, the main goal of which was independence from external political powers

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70) Rzewuski, *Monarchia mixta czyli poszukiwanie suwerena*.

71) Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, 23–24.

72) See Butterwick, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1733–1795)*, chapter 1.

73) The spectacularly inclusive character of this political model is also visible in the numbers. In some lands of the Commonwealth (especially Mazovia province, and some parts of Lithuania) the gentry constituted even up to 20–25% of the whole population, with a minimum of 6% (up to 8%; there is an ongoing debate as to the upper limit) on the scale of the whole Commonwealth. This had no comparison in Europe of that day, where the percentage of the noblemen was usually between 0.5%–2%. See Ichnatowicz, Mączak, Zientara, and Żarnowski, *Spółeczeństwo polskie od X do XX wieku*, 239; Kłoczowski, *Europa*, 139; Marian Kallas, *Historia ustroju Polski X – XX w.*, 73. These estimations are based on data concerning the 1570s and 1580s. It is believed that these numbers varied throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with regard to different groups of noblemen. It is commonly agreed that the number of poorer noblemen (the so called *szlachta zagrodowa* and *szlachta “gołota”*) were constantly increasing.



on the one hand; and on the other, the cultivation of a community whose aims were determined by the will of its members. This was expressed in the ideal of freedom for the common creation of laws, and the maintaining of legal order (since 1572 it also includes electing a king). It was accompanied by a *spirit of free and rational deliberation*. The ongoing pluralistic debate concerning the nature of the state, of just laws, and of the sovereign (involving the most prominent thinkers and political figures of the time); which was taking place in the Commonwealth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was something being at once the effect of and the creative contribution to the cultural landscape.<sup>74</sup> The mentioned above structural political freedom had to be accompanied by the individual freedom of each nobleman (rooted in their belonging to the community of nobles), which was always treated with high sensitivity.<sup>75</sup> It is out of such understanding of freedom that one of the fundamental elements of the *ethos* of Eastern Europe – *resistance toward tyranny* either internal or external – was born.

I said above that this political system was spectacularly inclusive. And yet, it was at the same time *radically exclusive*. Even if on the level of theoretical considerations *Rzeczpospolita* was often presented (especially in the sixteenth century) as the community of all inhabitants of the Commonwealth, in social-political praxis it belonged to the “chosen ones.” The political nation consisted only of members of one social class. The construction of the political sphere was based on the exclusion of the burghers and the peasantry from the political processes, depriving these two classes of political citizenship (which would have been clearly reflected in law). This was in striking contrast to the Western absolutist model, in which all who were subject to the law of the sovereign were recognized as citizens (regardless of their being *de facto* denied any significant political rights).<sup>76</sup>

It is telling that precisely out of the abovementioned spirit of resistance toward tyranny there appeared, within the space of the analysis, another form of democracy. It appeared as an anti-colonialist revolt against the extensive colonialization (economic as well as broadly cultural) undertaken by Polish and Ruthenian magnates. And as such, the revolt was expressive of and emblematic for the political aspirations of the excluded ones.<sup>77</sup> Obviously, we refer here to the community of free Ukrainians – Cossacks – which very quickly evolved into a polit-

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74) For more extensive analysis of the phenomenon see Rzewuski, *Monarchia mixta czyli poszukiwanie suwerena*.

75) See *ibid.*, 54–61.

76) See Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, “I Rzeczpospolita: historia pewnej idei,” 81.

77) In 1651 (i.e., during the Cossacks’ uprising) Polish highlanders (peasants from the Southern, mountain regions of Poland), clearly inspired by Cossacks, stood up against the oppression of Polish noblemen. Their leader was Aleksander Kostka-Napierski – a nobleman of middle rank inspired by the ideal of the Commonwealth as the common good of all inhabitants regardless of the social class. The minimalistic goal of the revolt was to gain freedom for the peasantry and the abolishment of serfdom; the maximalist goal was the abolishment of the gentry as a privileged social class. The revolt was quickly defeated, Kostka-Napierski was imprisoned and brutally executed. There would be nothing special about these events. At those times peasant revolts/wars were quite common all over Europe (especially in German lands). What seems to be special is that less than five years later this social “capital” was used against the Swedish invasion on the Commonwealth. The very same highlanders stood up against an external invader to defend *their country* and their king. See Juliusz Bardach, Bogusław Leśnodorski, Michał Pietrzak, *Historia ustroju i prawa polskiego*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Prawnicze PWN, 1998, 207. At a moment during the war, they even played a crucial role. It is also very significant that the leaders of at least two of Cossacks uprisings – the very first from 1591 and the most famous from 1648 – were commanded by either Polish (Krzysztof Kłosiński) or Ruthenian (Bohdan Khmelnytsky) noblemen. This tendency would recur in the active participation of the peasantry in the national insurrection from 1794 and then in the January Uprising (1863–64). Obviously, this active participation was preceded by significant changes in the social-political discourse (as well as concrete plans of significant social-economic changes), changes provoked by the very concrete political exigencies. But in any case, the Commonwealth was presented again as the common good of all its inhabitants. See Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, “I Rzeczpospolita: historia pewnej idei,” 81. Perhaps, it would be a slight exaggeration to claim, like for example Jerzy Kłoczowski, that the spirit of resistance against tyranny as well as the spirit of civil society among “lower” social classes were directly inspired (or even influenced) by the noblemen and their *ethos*. And yet, it is equally mistaken to see these two phenomena as disconnected. The noblemen-democracy – especially in its golden age of the sixteenth century – was based on the idea that *Rzeczpospolita* was the common good, that is, it was to integrate all its inhabitants as co-responsible members of the community. The genuinely republican model – probably the most impressive since the Roman Republic – was there, even if the real practice was too often based on a radical distortion.

ical organism with its own form of government and democratic institutions. Cossacks Hetmanate – being in fact a form of military democracy – was based on the very same ideals of freedom understood as co-responsibility for the common good of the state and its members.<sup>78</sup> It was ruled by a hetman who was a representative of the community and responsible before it. It was born out of resistance against external tyranny (of Polish and Ruthenian lords), and maintained by resistance toward internal tyranny (the fate of every hetman who was unfaithful to the will of the community was truly miserable...). The abovementioned understanding of freedom as a form of co-responsibility for *publico bono* of the community found its ultimate articulation in 1710, when the Ukrainians (Cossacks) formulated the first constitution in the world – the constitution of Prylyp Orlyk. The document, among many regulations, proposed (long before Montesquieu) the division of the government into legislative, executive, and judiciary powers. Even if, as some scholars (e.g., Serhii Plokhy) claim, not without reasons, that it should not be recognized as a constitution in a full and proper sense, it certainly shows the will and the capacity of Ukrainians for self-governance as well as their will for historical-cultural self-determination.<sup>79</sup>

In just these two (somehow opposite) examples can the origins of the same *ethos* be seen: of freedom understood in negative (freedom from tyranny – external as well as internal), and positive terms (the sense of responsibility for the common good, and active participation in the social-political sphere). This *ethos* was re-constructed many times throughout the dramatic history of Eastern Europe. It is not a coincidence that Poland was the only European country during WWII which was capable of not only establishing a resistance movement, but also of creating the entirety of the underground state-structures. It is not a coincidence that it was Polish and Ukrainian (regardless of its nationalist provenance) anti-communist underground armies who were fighting the longest (until early 1950s) against the “red regime.” It is not a coincidence that it was dissidents’ movements in Ukraine and in the Baltic states that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is not a coincidence that the Polish Solidarity Movement led eventually to the fall of the “iron curtain.” It is not a coincidence that the Ukrainian spirit of resistance brought to life three Maidans in just three last decades, with the Revolution of Dignity being the most dramatic, but also the most spectacular in terms of massive social mobilization, self-organization, solidarity, and the uncontested victory. It is not a coincidence that Belarusians (who had stood courageously arm in arm with Poles in anti-Russian uprisings), stood up in manifestations gathering hundreds of thousands against the tyrannical regime of Lukashenka, and they were tenacious for months in their anger and will to finally establish justice and democracy in their country. None of these phenomena (and the list is limited to the most known examples, there were many others) was accidental; all of them were expressive of the same *ethos*, which provided the peoples of Eastern Europe with their own *ethical substance*.

It is true that this *ethos* has had dramatic ups and downs, that it was fragile, and prone to different distortions. Starting with the example of the atrophy of the Commonwealth’s political system, which throughout the eighteenth century became inoperative, almost turned anarchic, and eventually led to the partitions. Throughout the whole twentieth century this *ethos* was distorted in so many different ways that it seemed there was nothing left of it; that the social sphere was something perhaps existing in Western Europe, but in the Eastern it melted into the air; that there were no signs of social capital, without which it was not possible to even begin thinking about civil society. Instead of freedom (the peoples were once so proud of) there were all around only captive minds, distrust, suspicions, inertia, disrespect toward the common good – and all kinds of inhumane, massive misdeeds and atrocities driven by them. In such a landscape, the *ethos* being discussed was not even a faded memory. We certainly should remember that those dark times – when this *ethos* was cultivated only by a small number of the just and courageous, who were ready to pay the highest price for it – were not something accidental

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78) See Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, chapters 8–12.

79) For more see “The First Constitution of Ukraine (5 April 1710)”; Plokhy, *Gates of Europe*, 128–29.

either. Since this *ethos* was born, and as it is being reborn through constant confrontation with Russianness, there can always be expected or unexpected signs of contamination. It is at the constant risk of falling into different forms of populism and (semi-)autocracies, of following semi-nationalist and xenophobic impulses, and of putting aggressively individual egotistic interests over the common good.

### *Diversity*

Milan Kundera, in his famous essay which was referred to previously, while describing Central Europe (from within a different cultural geography), used the phrase which characterizes Eastern Europe very well (as it is being proposed here) – “the greatest variety within the smallest space.” The phrase was at odds with the Russian cultural monstrosity – “the smallest variety within the greatest space.”<sup>80</sup> Before Eastern Europe became a territory for colonialist conquests, and then a laboratory for the most horrific experiments on humanity, for almost three centuries it was a spectacular space of the coexistence of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions. *It was a home for many, and a specific model for a multicultural, social-political organism.*

I have already mentioned the inclusive (and at the same time exclusive) character of the political nation. But the multicultural character of the Commonwealth was not limited to the ruling class. Between the end of the fifteenth and eighteenth century, besides the dominant ethnic groups – Poles (around 40%), Lithuanians (13–15%), Ruthenians (Belarusians and Ukrainians about 20%) – this space was also inhabited by the Jewish (ranging from 4% up to almost 10% in the eighteenth century), Germans (4% and including Royal Prussia up to 10%), Livonians, Armenians, Scots, Olęders,<sup>81</sup> Vlachs, Karaims, and Tatars. Each minority had its own privileges and legal status. So, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a truly multi-ethnic organism with each ethnic group representing a slightly different cultural model or different form of self-understanding; and with each having an original contribution to its culture, and particular role(s) played within the social and economic dimension. Obviously, this co-existence did not exclude tensions, prejudices, and so forth, but they never took a form of open and violent conflict either between ethnic minorities themselves, or between dominating ethnicities and minorities.<sup>82</sup> It is well known that the cultural model promoted by Polish noblemen was dominating and as such worked as a kind of peaceful cultural colonization, which strived for the assimilation of ethnic minorities; but this was only a partially effective process (among the ethnic minorities only Scots became fully assimilated by the end of seventeenth century). It also led to the marginalization of the Lithuanian language, and eventually throughout the eighteenth century also of the Lithuanian cultural identity that later, with the rise of national movements, would be the cause for long lasting and serious tensions between Poles and Lithuanians.<sup>83</sup>

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80) Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 33.

81) Settlers from Friesland and other parts of the Netherlands. As Mennonites they risked serious repressions (in most cases death) in the Netherlands and Germany. They found shelter and independence first in Poland (the first Olęders came to Poland in the fourteenth century), then in the Commonwealth, where they lived undisturbed until the partitions. In terms of social structure, they belonged to rich (and free) peasantry.

82) One can object here that the mass killing of Jews during the Khmelnytsky Uprising, and to some degree during other Cossacks’ uprisings, is the best proof against the point. However, in my view these bloody and tragic events had no character of ethnic or religious conflict. The Khmelnytsky Uprising was one of the first (if not the first) anti-colonialist war – it was not directed against any ethnicity or religious denomination; mainly it was the war against the tyranny of Polish and Ruthenian magnates, and it was a war for freedom and political recognition. Obviously, it had ethnic and religious components – even many Ruthenian landlords were representing either Roman Catholic denomination or the Uniate Church and as such they were posing a threat for Orthodox Christianity. Jews, because of the specific economic role they played, symbolized for Cossacks the oppression of the gentry. In this way they became the first objects of the Cossacks’ anger, and the victims of their aggression.

83) See Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, chapters 2–4; Kopczyński, and Tygielski, *Pod wspólnym niebem*.

This for the most part peaceful, creative co-existence was, in a sense, a consequence of the concept of individual freedom (in the sense laid down above, not in the modern sense), which led to the prevailing attitude of tolerance; and, it was further reflected in religious tolerance. The Commonwealth was inhabited by representatives of the three great monotheistic religions. As to Christianity, it would have been almost impossible to find any denomination not represented in the Commonwealth. This actual, persisting state of affairs<sup>84</sup> was legitimized by the act of the Warsaw Confederation (1573) guaranteeing freedom of faith to all noblemen and practically, by implication, to all persons regardless of their ethnicity or social class (with some restrictions as to relations between noblemen and peasants, but even here the restrictions were limited).<sup>85</sup> In the times when Europe was being torn apart by the still ongoing, extremely brutal and bloody religious wars, or when a denomination was regulated by a sovereign (*cuius regio, eius religio*) – the regulations of the Warsaw Confederation were completely exceptional. The Commonwealth became “a place of shelter for heretics,” as sarcastically put it one of the guardians of Roman Catholicism. Even if the reality was not always as ideal as prescribed by the regulations of the Confederation, and that there were examples of religious persecutions; they were strictly limited, and never reached the level of open, large-scale conflicts. Even taking into consideration the gradual erosion of the spirit of the Confederation starting from the mid of the seventeenth century (due to more and more dominating and “imperial” position of the Catholic Church), its legal status remained intact until the end of the Commonwealth, that is, for over two centuries.<sup>86</sup> All this makes the Commonwealth a very special cultural space – *a space of pluralism and tolerance*, that is, of values that needed a long time to mature for all of Europe.<sup>87</sup>

This multi-ethnic, inclusive, and pluralistic project eventually failed when confronted by absolutist empires founded on increasing centralization and instrumentalization of power and resources. The only efficient response to imperialism was seen in the rise of national movements, which eventually led to the fall of empires and to the creation of national states. This, in turn, initiated a series of tensions between the states, nations, and ethnicities. Furthermore, not all nations of the former Commonwealth were lucky enough to successfully establish their own states – Belarusians and Ukrainians were divided between Poland and Soviet Russia. And after the failure of the Polish federalist project, Polish policy toward ethnic minorities was based on their marginalization, which was one of the reasons for the rise of distrust and enmity between the peoples. Furthermore, empires did not say the last word yet. The next, most dramatic and extremely brutal act was still to come. It started with the horrific economic-social experiment in the part of Ukraine annexed by Soviet Russia – the brutal reality of Holodomor which took the lives of at least 4 million Ukrainians, by starving them to death. Then came the massive executions (only in the times of the Great Terror 1937–1938 over 100 thousand Poles were killed in the Soviet Union, and many more Ukrainians), the massive deportations of peoples whose only fault was to be on the wrong side of the border, and so on. With the alliance between Nazi-Germany and

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84) The spirit of tolerance was deeply rooted in the historical experience of Poland going back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and found its first legal and theological articulations already at the beginning of the fifteenth century (Paweł Włodkowic, Stanisław ze Skarbimierza); articulations resonating in the whole Christian Europe. That spirit of tolerance was then gradually becoming a principle legitimized by tradition. In this sense the act of Confederation was only a legal confirmation of that tradition. Tazbir, “Tolerancja religijna w Rzeczypospolitej XVI–XVII stulecia,” 119–20.

85) Kłoczowski, *Dzieje chrześcijaństwa polskiego*, 119–20; Kłoczowski, *Europa: Chrześcijańskie korzenie*, 149.

86) The period between the second half of the seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth century was a time of rising religious intolerance. The Polish Counter-Reformation managed to establish some strict regulations one-sidedly promoting Catholicism (e.g., prohibition of conversion from Catholicism, serious penalties for atheism, reservation of all public offices for Catholics, etc.). In fact, what had been lost in times of the Counter-Reformation (in a sense of eroding spirit of tolerance) was restored in times of the Enlightenment. Tazbir, “Tolerancja religijna w Rzeczypospolitej XVI–XVII stulecia,” 131.

87) See Kłoczowski, *Europa: Chrześcijańskie korzenie*, 149–51; Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, 23. For more detailed and nuanced analysis see Tazbir, *Państwo bez stosów*.

Russia, being the final step toward WWII, Eastern Europe was determined to become the theatre for unbelievable atrocities: the massive deportations, denigration of all nations, and mass executions. And finally, the inhumane, barbaric, and unprecedented Event *arranged, orchestrated and conducted by Nazi-Germany* – the Holocaust. There is one phenomenon, which is especially emblematic here, namely the way in which the two restored empires were capable of using the nationalist impulses of the East-European peoples in order to divide them further and direct them against each other – leading to the most dramatic, and brutal large scale events; and the way they were able to foster antisemitic impulses and use them for their deadly purposes. One of the most tragic dimensions of WWII is that the lands of Eastern Europe, being a home for European Jews for over seven centuries, had become the lands of their, almost complete, annihilation. The nation that formed an inextricable part of the Eastern European identity (the Jewish people and culture), an essential component of the cultural landscape, was gone. One of the most horrific aspects of this tragedy is that even with the admission that beyond any doubt *it is Germany who carries an indubitable historical responsibility* for the Event, all of the peoples of Eastern Europe had their active contribution (to this or that extent, in a more or less limited way). It is striking how difficult for us is to fully admit that; how much we prefer to concentrate on those who heroically tried to defend as many lives as they could; as if they were more Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish and so forth; than those who did the complete opposite. The same holds for the misdeeds and atrocities which took place between our nations. In most cases the peoples of Eastern Europe are ready to take responsibilities, but mostly in general terms,<sup>88</sup> when it comes to details each side has its own story. And yet, there is a willingness to talk about these most painful moments in our common history and this is certainly a good sign.

After all these events, in a landscape filled with states that are ethnically and religiously monolithic (completely e.g., Poland, or largely e.g., Lithuania, Ukraine), and still permeated by old, not properly reconciled conflicts, are there any remnants of this cultural diversity mentioned before? Each nation now has its own separate, so to speak, cultural profile (which is pretty much the case in the whole of Europe), different points of reference and different narratives by means of which they make sense of who they are. So, in this changed reality, perhaps we should not look for diversity – it is already there; perhaps we should look for unity in diversity. Eastern Europe has always been the space of many cultural models, many discourses, many stories – and that is one of its greatest values. Scholars, by uncovering, analyzing, and creatively confronting them can cultivate this value.

### *Borders and Limits*

While drawing any cultural map of Eastern Europe the category of border cannot be omitted. Not only for the trivial reason that each truly human space is somehow limited,<sup>89</sup> that is, has its borders/limits/boundaries. The very category of border points at another essential feature of Eastern Europe – its liminality. What does it mean? First, Eastern Europe has been radically determined by strict borders: political, and more broadly, cultural. It is enough to remember count de Segur's remarks (emblematic for Enlightenment) on the border between Prussia and Poland (see above). By means of these borders, Eastern Europe was isolated, objectified, detached from the European community, depreciated; and because of them, eventually annihilated (in political terms). The very metaphor of "iron curtain" at once covering and constituting the shadowy sphere of inferiority, hostility, and strangeness is very telling.

Second, as has already been argued, one of the main meanings of the adjective "Eastern" here means the countries which constitute the Eastern *limes* of Europe, the lands beyond which one cannot speak any longer

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88) At least this recognition of general responsibility is something which clearly distinguishes us from Russians...

89) With one notable example mentioned above.



of Europe; the lands which are exposed to whatever can come from beyond borders. Ukraine's long-lasting resilience against the barbarian Russian invasion justifies very well the reference to the ancient Roman category – the ultimate borders have to be fortified, or at least to have the potential to be properly defended. This point shows well one aspect of Eastern Europe as a cultural formation in its trans-historical nature. This aspect was clearly visible in the response of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, but also Belarusian emigratory circles to the current war of Russia against Ukraine. All these states responded in the very same way, as if in a single uncompromising voice. This aspect means, to express it in the Plessnerian idiom, the easiness with which the peoples of Eastern Europe can take, whenever necessary, a centric attitude, where the limits (or borders) are meant not to be trespassed, where they are treated in the absolute, non-negotiable sense, and where they decide about our existence and our identities. In this sense borders, as limits, are not something accidental, but they rather belong to the very *eidos* of Eastern Europe. It is difficult not to think here about the Baltic Way – the event which took place on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1989 (two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union) – the life chain going from Vilnius through Riga to Tallin, that is, stretching for almost 700 kilometers. It consisted of over two million people from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia gathered together to send a simple, and yet profound message addressed to Russia uncompromisingly: “Here we stand, as the free peoples!”

One can follow here Martin Heidegger explaining the ancient Greek metaphysics of limit – *peras*:

This standing-there, this taking and maintaining a *stand* that stands erected high in itself, is what the Greeks understood as Being. Whatever takes such a stand becomes *constant* in itself and thereby freely and on its own runs up against the necessity of its limit, *peras*. This *peras* is not something that first accrues to a being from outside. Much less is it some deficiency in the sense of a detrimental restriction. Instead, the self-restraining hold that comes from a limit, the having-of-itself wherein the constant holds itself, is the Being of beings; it is what first makes a being be a being as opposed to a nonbeing. For something to take such a stand therefore means for it to attain its limits, to de-limit itself... . Limit and end are that whereby beings first begin to be.<sup>90</sup>

Then he adds: “Whatever places itself into and thereby enacts its limit, and thus stands, has form, *morphē*. The essence of form, as understood by the Greeks, comes from the emergent placing-itself-forth-into-the-limit.”<sup>91</sup> To be, means to be capable of projecting one's own limits, of self-determination, and it is not an accidental nor an additional act. One comes to be what one is, one achieves a form in the very act of projecting oneself into one's limits. Resoluteness of the Balts (in 1989), resilience of the Ukrainians (in this uneven war), indomitableness of the spirit of Belarusian soldiers from the Kalinoŭski Regiment supporting Ukraine against Russia, hundreds of Polish military volunteers – such as Piotr Mitkiewicz – doing the same and to any question as to “Why?” having only one response: “That was my duty.” All of this is exactly taking a stand, enacting, and re-enacting an East European limit, that is, the re-affirming of identity versus non-being. In this sense, border as limit, as Heidegger teaches us, is not something derivative, but something primal and positive – “I can be who I am only by resolutely taking a stand.” But it is not an act which can be done once and for all. It must be constantly re-affirmed.

But what can be read out from Heidegger is positive in yet another sense, which is confirmed by the very phenomenon of Eastern Europe. This sense can stand in opposition to the previous one as it indicates not a centric position, but rather conversely the excentric one. To stay for a while with Heidegger's wording – to

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90) Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 63.

91) *Ibid.*

project oneself into one's limit/border means also to be related to what is beyond. Now, the mode of experiencing border(s), specifically characterizing the peoples of Eastern Europe, is exemplified in the creative attitude toward them. That is, in turning them into borderlands – a space of creative encounter (though often full of tensions, prejudices, and animosities), and co-existence of several ethnicities, languages, and cultural models. Borderlands function across or irrespective of strict political borders and reveal before one a contingent nature of one's cultural frameworks, and as a consequence one's own finitude. In other words, borderlands are not something institutionally established, but rather creatively undertaken; they are not political or social factu- alities, but rather events. As Julia Sushytska put it:

What characterizes borderlands and distinguishes them from other kinds of places is that it is impossible for them to become a part of the establishment. Being ambiguous by nature, they resist all kinds of stable structures. Therefore, no state, and especially not the kind with an imperialist agenda, can constitute the place of borderlands... . The materiality of borderlands consists of the several more or less institutionalized identities – cultures, ethnicities, religious traditions, etc. – that co-exist in a concrete geographical area, as well as the history of their interaction. It is *topos* – the lands saturated with history – that makes borderlands specific...<sup>92</sup>

Eastern Europe was filled with such *topoi*, which, because of dramatic twists and turns of history as well as smooth transitions, have been gradually disappearing. Sushytska herself points at the example of the city of Lviv saturated with Ukrainian and Polish history. We certainly can point at the city of Vilnius, Grodno, or Puńsk as well as many different regions between Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania. Perhaps, we should think about Eastern Europe as being a *topos* of different *topoi*. What makes Eastern Europe specific is its essential *in-between-ness*. On the most general level – it is about being situated between the West and the East, between Europe and its Other.<sup>93</sup> On a more specific level – it is about being born in the lands that – whether we are aware of that or not – are everywhere “saturated by history” and wrapped into sedimented layers of different cultural identities and models. These macro- and micro-levels of in-betweenness create a space crossed, in many different ways and in many different directions, by visible and invisible borders; and in dwelling in such spaces we are condemned, so to speak, to a constant search for our form. As Czesław Miłosz (for whom many of these cultural varieties were clearly visible) put it in his *Rodzinna Europa* – what is typical for an Eastern European is “a lack of form – external and internal”; all of their positive features and virtues are derived from a fundamental vice, which is a constant immaturity, they are driven by “a sudden inflow or outflow of internal chaos.”<sup>94</sup> This metaphor of suspended immaturity can provoke the obvious association with Kant's answer to the question about Enlightenment as a subject's rational self-reliance, and as we could add, discursive self-transparency. And right here a certain controversy appears: Eastern Europe did appropriate the ideals of Enlightenment. However, the concept of reason as promoted by the Enlightenment – that is understood as *apriorical*, transparent, impersonal, ahistorical, free from the constraints of tradition, and so forth – was from the beginning too restrictive and too limited to give justice to the richness of cultural experience. It seems that *Eastern Europe* (unlike Kant) *begins with sensus communis and arrive at reason*. Therefore, it has tended to express itself in a kind of cultural polyphony – there are different rationalities equally legitimate, rooted in the facticity of historically determined communities. Furthermore, there are certain truths, certain experiences which cannot be explained by purely

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92) Sushytska, “What Is Eastern Europe?” 57.

93) Ibid., 58.

94) Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa*, 80.

rational concepts, where as I mentioned above, one must refer to meta-rationality. This chaos to which Miłosz refers can be seen sometimes as a balancing between rationality and irrationality, sometimes as diving into the element to which only meta-rationality can give justice, sometimes as an almost maniacal drive toward mythologizing. But precisely in this way is this chaos a source of extreme richness of forms through which Eastern Europeans try to make sense of reality and of themselves.

In this sense, the Eastern European condition is to constantly be in search of their own selves, to be unfinished, imperfect, permanently in-forming, and always coming-to-be.<sup>95</sup> Now, the question is how all this refers to the European project as I described it: historical, unfinished, pluralistic, self-reflective, and so forth. *Is it not the case that Eastern Europe, in a more self-reflective way, reveals the truth of Europe as such, the truth of the European project?*

There is one more point which should certainly be made when thinking of Eastern Europe by referring to the category of border. To state the trivial – borders are movable. And to follow up with another triviality – borders are imposed (this distinguishes them from borderlands and boundaries). Starting from the middle of the eighteenth century Eastern Europe was like a stage with constantly changing scenography. It is almost impossible to count how many times the sudden, dramatic, and often total changes of the state borders took place here since then. Every single change carried with it violence, often enormous; every single change led to the destruction of whole life-worlds. In this sense, borders carry with them incurable traumas. Furthermore, there is a paradox inherent to the ontological status of borders – by moving they close, as movable they are fixed, and as such can be completely impassable. Let us refer to just two recent examples. The first one is that of the Polish-Ukrainian border after the Polish accession to the EU. In May 2004 within days, it ceased to be an opportunity for creative encounters, instead it started to indicate a strict line of demarcation between two completely separate (almost opposite) worlds. The fixity of the border became almost unbearable to most of the Ukrainians who wanted to enter Poland. The second example is more recent and much more drastic – the Polish-Belarusian border during the current hybrid attack launched by Belarusian and Russian regimes against Poland. Thousands of people fleeing from different parts of the world to look for shelter in Europe were caught in a deadly trap: having on one side the enormous brutality of the Belarusian soldiers and OMON, and on the other side iron fences with barbwire; each attempt to cross the border ends in being pushed back by the Polish border guards. They can neither move forward, nor come back, their whole existence is reduced to this immobile condition; there is no way out. Their inhumane experience is that of being confronted with an absolute border. In this event one can see, in condensed form, the brutal return of the worst nightmares of Eastern Europe.

## Opening Conclusion

Besides its post-colonialist connotations, Eastern Europe is first a *topographical* and *ethical* category, and only by implication does it become a geographical one. It has been constituted by and through a particular *topos*, a *topos* within which Europeanness has, for centuries been exposed to, and confronted with otherness, where Europeanness has constantly balanced between excentric and centric positions. This *topos* has provided conditions of possibility for unique ways of experiencing space and time, ourselves and others, home and what is beyond. It had its darker side, which took on various forms of being haunted by Russianness, expressed in actions and behaviors undermining (often quite effectively), the ideals of civil society. It has also had its own specific cultural vacuums and blind spots expressed in futile, reactive idealization and romanticization of its own cultural legacy. But more importantly this *topos* was, for a long time, expressed in a creative approach to

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95) Sushytska, “What Is Eastern Europe?” 62.

borders, in the tolerant co-existence of different ethnicities and religious denominations, in deliberative forms of the social and the political. Just as much was articulated in the spirit of resistance and dissent whenever the social and the political were radically alienated, whether by external invaders or by internal political forces. All of this was (and still is) expressive of a particular way of life, a particular *ethos* driven by the ideals of freedom, equality, consensus, and the sovereignty of people; it is actualized in a kind of cultural flexibility, hybridity, and polyphony. However, this *ethos* was not something given. It has been gradually developing throughout history with all its dramatic twists and turns. And this history was not only a history of these sublime ideals (and their partial actualizations), but also of their real and brutal negation – of unfreedom, inequality, deprivation of the most fundamental human rights, and of brutal conflicts and atrocities. That is why this *ethos* is grounded in a constantly renewed activity of self-questioning and self-searching, in a persistently recurrent will of self-determination. And that is why Eastern Europe cannot be enclosed in a single narrative; it expresses itself through many different and often competing stories.

To what extent is the mentioned *ethos* still expressive of who we are today? Can we still speak of a historically determined *sensus communis* which would be a basis for unity among the peoples of Eastern Europe? Can this category inform us about our possible futures? Can it serve as something differentiating us from Western Europe? Or are we already living in a completely unified Europe that leaves no room for local forms of self-understanding; a Europe that excludes any real differentiation? Jacques Derrida expressed the ideal of Europe with the phrase “one but many.” This way of thinking is worth following. There is a “community of experience and history,” (to slightly paraphrase Kundera) that clearly distinguishes the peoples of Poland, Ukraine, Baltic states, and Belarus from other parts of the continent. The question is whether this community is willing to speak with its own voice. Following Derrida’s phrase, one should go even a little further – the community being discussed is itself fundamentally marked by manyness. It is a unity in difference, a differentiated unity.

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