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The borders of Europe – seen from the outside

Eastern Europe is a normal but second-hand Europe, writes the Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak. All the people living there share European values – but these values were elaborated somewhere else.

There are not that many really original ideas in the world nowadays. Everything that can be said about Europe and its eastern borders has already been said, in one or another form. I am afraid that I do not have here anything specific to add. There is, however, the context that is changing continuously, and that calls for a reconsideration of the issue. The new context is determined first of all by the post-communist transformation of the former Communist world. The first decade of this transformation separated former countries of Eastern Europe in two categories: "winners" and "losers". The winners were granted entry tickets into the European Union and allowed to leave Eastern Europe; the losers have been told to stay in the Eastern European purgatory for an undefined time.

Despite these changes, I believe there is some continuity between old and new Eastern Europe. Of all the definitions that were ever made of Eastern Europe I personally prefer the one that defines Eastern Europe as a normal but second-hand Europe.¹ All the people living here are normal Europeans, in a sense that they share European values. They do it, however, with one important qualification, namely, that most of these values were not elaborated here originally. The region has experienced the impact of Christianity, Renaissance, Baroque, Romanticism, Modernism, Marxism, Liberalism etc. But none of these "isms" emerged here; they were imported from "the West". I can not think of any large imports in the opposite direction, from East to West, except the Black Death in the 15th century and Communism in the 20th century. These two are hardly worth to boasting about; in any case, they can not stand any serious comparison with the Western flow of ideas and goods.

Eastern Europe is a second hand Europe to the extent that it tries to emulate ideas and practices that emerged in Western Europe, during large political and economic transformations in early modern and modern times. Since then, each country of this region has had numerous modernizers and Westernizers who claimed that for the sake of national welfare their compatriots had "to catch up" with developments "in the West". These claims were based on historical arguments that the countries in question did belong to the "West" once: "Poland – the bastion of Western, Catholic civilization"; "The Czechs – the only Slavic nation with a Western standard of living"; "Hungary – whose Golden Bull is coeval with the English Magna Carta", "Romanians – the proud descendants of the Roman legionnaires". Along these lines, Ukrainian

intellectuals emphasized the European character of the Ukrainian cultural and political traditions, and placed Ukraine "between East and West".² The implication was that since these countries once belonged to or were connected with the "West" in the past, they had the right to be there in the future.

We may make ironic remarks about these statements. We may also deconstruct them. But we may not discard them that easily, since they constitute a part of historical reality, in the sense that they served as a base for many political decisions, drawing borders, granting citizenship. They serve to legitimize attempts to escape a politically endangered zone of the East, where, in the words of a Ukrainian intellectual, history presented an endless continuum of madness with short lucid intervals. For many Eastern Europeans, the West was a symbol of political stability, democracy and good living standards - and they did believe that living standards and democracy were correlated³ - in short, something that they were definitely missing under East European circumstances. While they were striving for Western values, as they understand it, they considered Europe as their natural ally. They hoped very much that their attitudes would be reciprocated. And that Europe would come to their rescue or, at least, would provide them with some affirmative action, when needed.

Needless to say, most of their expectations have proven to be false. The failures of the "East" to behave in a civilized "Western" manner and the denials of "West" to accept the European character of the "East" in the 20th century served as a major source of frustrations. These frustrations are built on a basic misunderstanding that is shared equally in the West and in the East. It is based on the presumption that the formula of political and economic modernization which emerged in one culturally determined society, could be successfully transferred to and implemented in another cultural milieu through Westernization (as a matter of fact, in Eastern Europe, the terms, modernization and Westernization, were intrinsically connected). It implied fusing elements, that have little or no natural affinity with one another, say the technological accomplishments of Western, and above all, English-speaking civilization with non-Western civilization.⁴

Modernisation made a large intrusion in this world during the two world wars and Sovietization. It was a most traumatic experience: according to some estimations, during this period within the borders of contemporary Ukraine every second male and every fourth female perished in a violent death.⁵ A final balance of this modernization seems to be very controversial. It was mostly economic modernization that followed the Western patterns, according to the Soviet motto of "catching up" with West (even though the Soviet leaders had a rather limited understanding where Western technological development was heading to). The political modernization or rather the lack of it did not promote the emergence of autonomous institutions with their own sources of power.⁶ Therefore, modernization here remained a largely unfinished project. It is believed that nowhere did the clash between economic and political modernization take such a violent turn as in Eastern Europe; and there is probably no other region of the world in which modern empire building and state-building have been subject to such ambivalence.⁷

This led, among other consequences, to a wholesale confusion and contestation of identities. In post-communist Eastern Europe, a large part of the population tends to accept mutually exclusive concepts and ideas. A recent survey in Ukraine revealed that 69 per cent stand for a closer union of Ukraine with Russia. And the same 69 per cent consider that Ukraine has to enter the

European Union.⁸ Sociologists refer to this state of mind as "post-totalitarian pluralism".⁹ As a historian, I might claim that such ambivalence of the population was displayed before the Soviet regime was established, and therefore is a result of long-term factors.¹⁰ On the one hand, it should be regarded as part and parcel of survival tactics, when under frequent political changes, the population tended to identify with the stronger side. On the other, it is the result of a persistence of traditional attitudes embedded in Eastern Christian values and practices.

Much has been said about the differences between the Christian West and the Christian East, and probably even much more just speculated. There are, however, some palpable facts that can illustrate these differences. If production of texts and book-printing is of paramount importance for the coining of modern identities, Eastern Europe was distinguished by a paucity of both, and could not stand a comparison with the Western Christian world: as there were 200 million volumes were published in the Western Christian territories by the beginning of the 17th century, in the East Christian region no more than 40,000–60,000 were printed.¹¹

The *East Christian (Byzantine or Rus')* legacy is held to be responsible for the persistence of a certain set of political traditions. While the "Western pattern" of politics lies in the separation of religious and secular spheres, Eastern Europe was characterized by a blurring of the religious and secular powers. The rivalry of the ruler and the Church in the West made it possible for the third parties to emerge with their own sources of power. It formed the historical basis for what was later called civil society. In contrast to that, the subordination of the Eastern church to the state led to the absence of a second political actor, and so, by definition, of any other actors. In words of a contemporary political analyst, "[t]he symbolic drama of Canossa illustrated this vividly. In no other historical tradition was it conceivable that a powerful secular ruler like Emperor Henry IV would undertake a penitent's pilgrimage, in a hair shirt with a rope around his neck, to expiate his politico-religious sins or, in power terms, to recognize the religious authority of Pope Gregory VII, whom he had unsuccessfully challenged. The idea of the tsar of Muscovy or the Byzantine emperor or the Ottoman sultan performing an analogous penance is an inherent absurdity"¹²

Since major nation-building projects in Eastern Europe were basically anti-imperial, they had to rely on the resources of civil institutions. But given local political traditions, the latter were very feeble and lacked continuity. Therefore local nationalisms were seriously handicapped in their development, much to despair of local nation-builders (the same holds true, as Geoffrey Hosking suggests,¹³ even for Russian nationalism). As a Ukrainian socialist from the Russian empire wrote in 1870s, "[b]esides three groups, Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, there exists a fourth one: *all-Rus'*, something hopeless, a dense stratum of [different] ethnic groups and nationalities covering *Rus'*."¹⁴

By this token, the making of modern Ukraine (as well as Russia and Belarus') was bound to be the unmaking of old *Rus'*. This project largely remained unfinished. Persistence of the *Rus'*, *Rus'kyi* (*Ruthenian*) identity, as distinct from modern Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian identities, among local population can be traced well till the World War II.¹⁵ In the post-communist Ukraine, it is reflected in a phenomenon that sociologists call "Eastern Slavic proximity"; within a range of various Eurasian and North American nations, Ukrainians tend to identify their interests with Russians and Belarusians, while

feeling increasingly alienated from others.¹⁶

The persistence of *Rus'* legacy predetermines (if not in rigid terms) identification with East Slavic Europe. And that identification is here to stay for a long time. In the words of a historian, "[t]he Byzantine heritage of [...] Ukrainian populations and more recent long-range developments – the latest of which is the Russian cultural impact upon a large part of Ukrainian lands – can recede into the background in the heady atmosphere of change, but their effects will not disappear overnight".¹⁷

I do not want to be misunderstood. I do not want to claim a *Sonderweg* for Eastern Europe. As a matter of fact, Eastern Europe was a large contact zone between different cultures and religions; therefore there is a place for numerous legacies and tendencies. An emphasis on Eastern Christian culture makes sense as it helps to understand that Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, belong to Europe in another way, than, say, Greece, or Portugal do. It does not deny the European character of Eastern Europe. Neither does it say that there is no real difference between Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, and they should necessarily form a common Eastern European bloc, in opposition to the European Union. What it does say is that different historical legacies have to be given their due, or, in a formulation of the path-dependency theory, "where you get to, depends on where you came from".¹⁸

The fact that a certain region or a country belongs to Europe cannot be proven by a reference to "objective" geography or history. Eastern Europe, as any other historical phenomenon, exists at least twice: as a "palpable" reality, and as an intellectual construct. Quite often "what men think is more important in history than the objective facts."¹⁹ In the case of Eastern Europe, its European character is proven by the numbers of people who are willing to believe that they belong to Europe. But there are different ways to belong to Europe, as there are different rival models of what kind of Europe the region is: is it Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Central Europe, or Eurasia? Each has its own political implication, including membership in the European Union, or in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

None of these options can claim a decisive majority. A general balance depends a lot on messages sent from beyond the region. So far, the messages from Brussels are clear: Eastern Europe will not be accepted, even in the distant future, and there is nothing to discuss here. As Romano Prodi once stated, the fact that many Ukrainians and Armenians feel European means nothing to him, since New Zealanders also feel European.²⁰ This is, I believe, a dangerous way of thinking. It implies that beliefs are not important, and that only pragmatic considerations should be accounted for. Berlusconi stated recently that the European Union has to include Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, and Moldova to counteract the American dominance.²¹ Despite their differences as to whether Eastern Europe has to be included or excluded, Prodi and Berlusconi seem to convey a similar message (at least, they can be read so from an Eastern European perspective): Europe is nothing more, but, to use Tony Judt's definition, a "Grand Illusion" united around pragmatic interests.²² And the discussion about European values is an ideological screen to disguise these interests.

In my opinion, to think that way is to commit a triple intellectual betrayal. It means to betray the aspirations of millions of people in Eastern Europe who were and still are struggling for democracy and economic welfare against local authoritarian regimes. It also means a betrayal of the intellectual and political

investments that the "West" has made to transform the Eastern European space. And it would be a betrayal of the European idea in general, if it could not be transferred to Eastern Europe.

Modern history can be regarded as the attempts of Western civilization to Europeanize and to Westernize the world everywhere, with all the bad and good consequences. But only in Eastern Europe had this Westernization taken such deep roots that it became an essence of local identities. Without it, this space most likely would have remained a large and ambivalent Rus', and not have differentiated into modern Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Eastern Europe is the only region beyond the West where the concept of the welfare state has been realized, albeit in the form of communism. If both the emergence and the dismantling of modern empires could be considered as a part of the European project, then Eastern Europe has made a significant contribution to it.

The role of Poland or more correctly, of the early modern *Rzeczpospolita*, must be emphasized in this context specifically. Until the end of the 18 century, and in some cases, until World War II, the lands of Rus' (now contemporary Belarus and Ukraine), were the Eastern borderlands of this state. The *Rzeczpospolita* served as a mediator of Western influences in this region; for the people of Eastern Europe, the West came to them in the Polish *kontusz* (in Polish dress). The Polish impact reached to the Belarusian–Russian and Ukrainian–Russian borderlands in the East. If one could draw a map of the Polish *Drang nach Osten*, then different historical zones of Polish influences would coincide with different zones of intensity of national identification in Ukraine and Belarus.²³ This does not mean that these encounters were not problematic; as a matter of fact, in the 20th century they even evolved into mutual ethnic cleansing in the Polish–Ukrainian borderlands. Still, what matters from the point of view of our discussion, is the fact that contemporary Eastern Europe is a result of Polish political and cultural investments. Little wonder why post–communist Ukraine and Belarus are of so much concern for contemporary Polish politics - what we can observe today is a critical, sometimes painful, reconsideration of the Polish historical legacy in this region. This reconsideration has been practiced by Polish intellectuals, who felt both emotional attachment and rational responsibility for both the past and the future of Eastern Europe.

One can hardly imagine such an emotional attachment for intellectuals and politicians further West of Poland. Still, the critical reconsideration of Western–Eastern encounters must be on their current agenda, since the eastern borders of Poland are now becoming the eastern borders of the European Union. A part of this reconsideration will necessarily deal with a reevaluation of Western influences: after all, neither Hitler nor the Holocaust were eastern inventions. Even Communism – including its formula of industrialisation – owed much to Western influences.²⁴ Another part calls for a critical reappraisal of Eastern European legacies. Before or despite Westernization, Eastern Europe had its own European values, which are largely overlooked from the Western European perspective. Until the XIXth century, Eastern Europe had a good record of religious and ethnic tolerance. The political traditions of *Rzeczpospolita* and, to some extent, the borderlands communities of Cossacks had the potential to evolve gradually into parliamentary democracy. The relationship between state and society at some points resembled the type of relationship that later became dominant in Western Europe. Traditional peasant societies in Eastern Europe were marked by a strong conservatism that in some cases granted some security for women and elderly people; and they served as a source of inspiration for Western romantics and Western conservatives.²⁵

The same goes for the post–communist decade. Since I come from Ukraine, let me talk about the Ukrainian case. For the West, Ukraine is a migraine; it looks and behaves like the sick man of Europe. Here we have an authoritarian and corrupt regime, with oligarchs on the top who manipulate democratic procedures, restrict political rights and suppress freedom of mass media. In Ukraine, opposition leaders and leading journalists die under suspicious circumstances; people are suffering from high unemployment, lack of social security and miserable salaries. But given its current state, it is more amazing to see the achievements. First of all, Ukraine managed to avoid the dangers of civil war and ethnic conflicts, that were very likely to emerge given the deep ethnic and political cleavages within society; they would make the Yugoslav war look like an innocent picnic.²⁶ There was no Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia or Chechnia here. Moreover, amidst the deepest political and economic crisis of 1994, Ukraine managed a peaceful presidential shift of power from Leonid Kravchuk to Leonid Kuchma. For sure, it is the Kuchma regime which is to blame for numerous manipulations and abuses of power, as manifested during the second presidential elections in 1999. But the last parliamentary elections (2002) revealed that there are limits to manipulations, and that a significant part of population does not want to follow orders given by state controlled media. The anti–presidential opposition managed to overcome traditional Western/Eastern divisions within Ukrainian society, and the opposition leader, Victor Iushchenko for a long time has been enjoying the highest popularity in the ranking of Ukrainian political figures. In the end, it seems that in contrast to developments in Belarus and Russia, the Ukrainian state failed to subjugate society - Ukrainian society manages to behave as an independent actor. As the *Financial times* wrote in a report on the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine: "despite it all, democracy is at work [here]".²⁷

To conclude: Eastern Europe, in its new reduced form, is a very controversial and largely unfinished project. But then modernity and Europe are unfinished and controversial projects, too. To complete them, one has to integrate them: a divided Europe is no Europe. And this integration must be a two–way process in which both sides mutually recognize values and shortcomings of the other. One needs not to be a prophet to foresee that this will take a long time.

And here is the trick: according to other prophecies, we are living in the very final years of modernity. What comes next, nobody really knows. But there is a feeling that the domination of Western civilization as it once was established in early modern times now is coming to an end. If this is so, does it make sense to complete the European project at all? I do not know the answer. Still, it seems to me that the awareness of the end of modernity should alleviate the choices that both "the West" and "the East" have faced in encounters with each another.

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¹ Gale Stokes, *Three Eras of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, New York / Oxford 1997.

² Ivan L. Rudnytsky, *Essays on modern Ukrainian history*, Edmonton 1987, p. 3.

³ Opinion polls done by the end of 1980s, revealed that both Russians and Ukrainians have considered the political culture of Western industrial democracies as an example worth emulating. The results looked strange giving the lack of democratic practices under the Soviet regime. The paradox can be explained by the fact that majority of Soviet people identified the Western political model with the Western standards of living. See: James L.

- Glibson, "The Resilience of Mass Support for Democratic Institutions and Processes in the Nascent Russian and Ukrainian Democracies", in: Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed. *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. New York, London 1995, pp. 53–111.
- 4 Theodore von Laue, "Problems of Industrialization", in: Theofanis George Stavrou, ed. *Russia under the last tsar*, Minneapolis 1969, pp. 117–153.
- 5 Bohdan Krawchenko, "The Man–Maid Famine of 1932–1933 and Collectivization in Soviet Ukraine", in: Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko, eds. *Famine in Ukraine 1932–1933*, Edmonton 1986, pp. 27–43.
- 6 George Schöpflin "The Political Traditions of Eastern Europe", in: *Eastern Europe... Central Europe... Europe*, in: *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 119 (Winter 1990), pp. 57–59.
- 7 Mark R. Bessinger, "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire", in: *Post–Soviet Affairs*, 1995, 11, 2, p.163 and 180.
- 8 Ivan Smishko, "Ukrainets – tse zvuchyt zahadokovo", in: *Postup* (Lviv), January 16–22, 2003; Lilia Utkina, "Back to the USSR", in: *Ukrainska Pravda* (Kiev), January 14, 2003.
- 9 E.I. Holovakha, "Postkommunisticheskoe razvitie Ukrainy i Rossii (sravnitel'nyj analiz social'no–politicheskix protsessov)", in: T.I.Zaslavskaya, ed., *Kuda idet Rossija?... Sotsialnaja transformatsija postsovietskogo prostranstva*, vol. III, Mezhdunarodnyi simposium 12–14 janvaria 1996, Moscow 1996, p. 51.
- 10 An anonymous author of a memorandum of the British Political Intelligence Department wrote in May 1918 about the attitudes of Ukrainian peasants: "Were one to ask the average peasant in Ukraine his nationality, [the peasant] would answer that he is Greek Orthodox; if pressed to say whether he is a Great Russian, a Pole, or an Ukrainian, he would probably reply that he is a peasant; if one insisted on knowing what language he spoke, he would say that he talked 'the local tongue'. One might perhaps get him to call himself by a proper national name and say that he is 'russki', but this declaration would hardly yet prejudice the question of a Ukrainian relationship; he simply does not think of nationality in the terms familiar to the intelligentsia [italics in the original]", quoted in: David Saunders, "What Makes a Nation a Nation? Ukrainians since 1600", in: *Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 10 (1993), pp. 111–112.
- 11 Markus Osterrieder, "Von der Sakralgemeinschaft zur Modernen Nation. Die Entstehung eines Nationalbewusstseins unter Russen, Ukrainern und Weissruthenen im Lichte der Thesen Benedict Andersons", Eva Schmidt–Hartmann, ed., *Formen der nationalen Bewusstseins im Lichte zeitgenössischer Nationalismustheorien*, München 1994. S.207. Osterrieder mistakenly gives 20 numbers of copies for the Eastern Christian Slavic region, where it must be 20 books. Provided that maximum number of copies of books was 3–4,000, then we get 40,000–60,000 copies.
- 12 Schöpflin, Op. cit., p. 57.
- 13 Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia. People and Empire, 1552–1917*, Cambridge 1997, passim.
- 14 Cited in: Mykhailo Hrushevskyi, *Z pochyniv ukrainskoho sochialistychnoho rukhu. Mykh. Drahomanov i zhenevskiyi socialistychnyi hurtok*, Vienna 1922, p. 64 [=in Ukrainian: *On Origins of Ukrainian Socialist Movement. Mykh. Drahomanov and Geneva Socialist Group*].
- 15 *Tragedija sovestskoi derevni. Kolektivizacija i raskulachivanije. Dokumenty i materialy*: in 5 vols. Vol.1–2, Moscow, 1999; 2000, passim [=in Russian: *Tragedy of Soviet Village. Collectivization and Deculakization. Documents and Materials*], passim; Karel Berkhoff, "Harvest of Despair. Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Regime", Cambridge, MA / London 2004, pp.205–212; Taras Kurylo, "A Child of the Legacy: Ukrainian nationalism in Nazi occupied Ukraine". MA Thesis. Nationalism Studies Program. Central European University, Budapest 2000, pp. 37–46.
- 16 Natalia Panina, "Nepodolana Dystancija", in: *Krytyka*, VII, 7–9 (July–August 2003), p.18 [=in Ukrainian: *A Distance Not Crossed*].
- 17 Ihor Sevchenko, *Ukraine Between East and West*, Edmonton 1996, p. 10.
- 18 Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton 1993, p. 179.
- 19 A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle of Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*, Oxford UP 1991, p. 17.
- 20 Quoted after: Roman Solchanyk, "Ukraine, Europe, and ... Albania", *Ukrainian weekly*, March 9, 2003.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Tony Judt. *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe*, New York 1996.
- 23 Maciej Lisicki, "Modlitewniki katolickie jako źródło do badan nad rozwojem stanu swiadomosci narodowej Bialorusinów," in: Tadeusz Stegner, ed., *Miedzy Odra i Dnieprem*.

Wyznania i Narody, Gdansk 1997, p.198–199; Ihor Sevchenko, *Ukraine Between East and West*, Edmonton 1996, pp. 116–117; Roman Szul, "Perspektywy regionalizmu Galcyjskiego w Polsce na tle tendencji międzynarodowych," in: Jerzy Chłopiecki and Helena Madurowicz–Urbanska (eds.), *Galicja i jej dziedzictwo*, vol. II *Spoleczenstwo i Gospodarka*, Rzeszów 1995, p. 80.

- ²⁴ Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain : Stalinism as a civilization*, Berkeley 1995.
- ²⁵ Andreas Kappeler, "Die Bedeutung der Geschichte Osteuropas für ein gesamteuropäisches Geschichtsverständnis", in: *Annäherungen an eine europäische Geschichtsschreibung*, Wien 2002.
- ²⁶ One has to be reminded that by the end of 1993, this was a scenario seriously considered by the CIA. According to the Economist, the Ukrainian economic crises made the death of the country in 1994 quite possible. Cf.: "Ukraine – The Birth and Possible Death of a Country", in: *The Economist*, 7 May, 1994; Williams D. and Smith R.J., "U.S. Intelligence Sees Economic Flight Leading to Breakup of Ukraine", in: *Washington Post*, January 25, 1994.
- ²⁷ Chrystia Freeland, Stefan Wagstyl and Tom Warner, "East or west: Ukraine's election could alter relations with Russia and Europe", in: *Financial Times*, October 12 2004.

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