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## *The Myth of Europa: Europe as Intellectual Construction*

*Different kinds of "mental maps" and stereotypical beliefs have always been an integral part of our thinking, as they allow us to omit the stage of analysis and to follow commonplace formulas. Psychologists define the notion of "mental maps" as images of the outer world created by the human mind. A characteristic feature of "mental maps" is their subjective nature, political bias, tendency to ruinous generalization, formation of negative image of the "other" for the sake of one's own political goals and satisfaction of one's own pride, often resulting from one's inferiority complex.*

### EUROPE AND THE EAST

In the last ten years in the political arena of the countries of Eastern Europe, fine words about the necessity of a common European house, new European society, high European values, etc. have become quite popular. Yet, what is that "Europe" which all who had been deprived of it are striving for? What do we, even though Eastern-, yet Europeans, understand of it? How does Europe comprehend herself?

In the common geographical sense, Europe is the region that reaches from Gibraltar to the Ural Mountains. Along with this definition, one could find also such definitions that present Europe as the main representative of modern civilization or at least of the Western Christian civilization. However, such classifications are just a few from many possible, and they don't seem to capture the essence of Europe.

When it comes to a definition of Europe's eastern part, quite often we encounter statements such as the one by Timothy G. Ash: "Europe is one of the biggest and most continuous myths." The vision of Europe as a mythical creation was not provoked just by some inimical relations between the "backward" East and the "flourishing" West. It was rather the result of a rapid change of Europe itself, the impossibility to grasp or taste the idea of prosperity that has been popularized in so many European centuries.

From the historical point of view, Europe had been in a certain sense a monolithic construction till the division of the Christian world into the "Catholic" and "Orthodox" one. Later on, the term "Europe" was used more often in relation to its Catholic and Protestant part, even though there has never been any evident attempt to cut off the Orthodox nations and countries entirely. Far more drastic changes happened in the epoch of the Enlightenment: the line of division changed its direction from "North-South" to "West-East."

Since then the term "Europe" is more often used along with the word "civilization," and the East is perceived as the "foe at the gates." The middle ground between East and West—the eastern part of Europe—is thought of by Enlightenment intellectuals as "Not-So-Much-Europe." The image of the West as something good, valuable *per se*, and naturally superior, comes along with this conviction. On the other hand, the word "Asia" is associated with cruelty, ugliness, and cunning. The "Asian exotics" come as the only more or less positive reflection.

### THE ISSUE OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN IDENTITY

"From Szczecin at the Baltic to Trieste at the Adriatic the iron curtain has pulled down through the entire continent," Winston Churchill declared in 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, far in the depths of another continent. These words signified the final division of Europe. Throughout the entire "Cold War," the iron curtain was understood as a quarantine barrier that was saving the world of the Christian civilization from its major danger. Gradually Eastern Europe became another world, the dark side of the continent, an alter ego to the West.

In 1989 a number of revolutions in the "Eastern" countries overthrew the local communist governments. The end of "Cold War" in Eastern Europe made irrelevant traditional notions such as the "iron curtain," "zone of Soviet influence," and "shadow," which emphasized the division of the continent into two parts. The freed states intensively attempted to become part of the elite club of the Western countries.

In 2000 at a conference in Bucharest, the Magyar publicist György KONRÁD presented his vision of principles of belonging to Central Europe. It was said that one who had fought against the Soviets had the right to be "cleansed." Such "fighters" were Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Poland (1956, 1968, 1970, 1980). Romanians and Western Ukrainians were not taken into account in spite of their long and enduring post-WW II resistance movements. The civil war in Russia was also ignored.

In a vigorous desire to define a new place for their countries on the virtual map of Europe, Central European intellectuals used Russia as the "Other" to produce an image of their own "Europeanness." The creators of the image of Central Europe—Milan KUNDERA, György KONRÁD, Mihály VAJDA—used whatever lay a little further to the east as an instrument for the construction of their own European identity. There was even a joke: the East begins at the eastern border of your country.

The dialogue between the West and the East is a halfway communication: the West uses the idea of Central Europe at times to reformulate its internal conflicts, yet the citizens of Warsaw, Budapest, Bratislava or Prague would never agree to be perceived by the "Westerners" with sweetness or acid patience. Still, they are more than ready to express the same "sweet/acid" attitude toward the people of Moscow or Kiev. On the other hand, for the countries which have become members of NATO and the EU to be called "Central European" turned out to be a sign of their inferiority. A new virtual border of the "elite club" has been drawn, and it became a dream target for the newcomer states.

### MODES OF DEFINITION OF EASTERN EUROPE

The third part of the continent is Eastern Europe. Where does this region start? Where are the actual borders of Europe now? Asia, Western and Eastern Europe were notions that appeared as a result of the intellectual reasoning of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The

Enlighteners used Eastern countries to supply a vivid contrast to the “civilization” of Western Europe. Asia has never been an alternative center; it has always been seen as periphery.

Instability is to be considered the main trait of Eastern Europe. It is somewhere between the West and the East, “civilization” and “barbarianism.” It is vague in itself and in relation to others. What is it then? Is it Western Asia or Eastern Europe? Such allocation would provide the possibility for creating something unique that could integrate the best of the two worlds. Yet, has this selection, integration, transformation and development ever been possible?

Remaining the middle ground and therefore the object of political desires of both sides, it has experienced evident difficulties in the development of its own identity. So far its efforts have mostly been spent on constant attempts at self-preservation. Its values became flexibility, conformism, and the ability to keep away. The dark and infamous East was seen as a mere crash-test dummy, a buffer zone against the communist malady.

**CENTRAL VS. EASTERN EUROPE?**

What is the essential difference between Central and Eastern Europe? In regard to today’s politics it is comfortable to talk about the history of Central Europe. However, the enthusiasts of originality and superiority of the Central European countries tend to forget that not so long ago their

countries were far too easily given up to the Soviets. For some reason, the West did not oppose such a crucial “amputation.” Later on, when the entire Soviet infrastructure fell apart, Western Europe was comfortable to embrace again the aborted idea of Central Europe.

What has happened to those Eastern European countries that have common borders with Russia? On one hand, they experienced isolation. The more Eastern post-Soviet countries, such as Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova or Romania, proved to be too far from the headquarters that offered support—such as the United States or Western European countries—which has been of so much use to the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

It is hard to compare the losses of the times of Stalin’s regime. Nonetheless, the Central European countries were incorporated into the Soviet bloc thirty years later than the “Soviet republics.” They were “lucky” because the centre of the totalitarian regime was in all senses “safely” distanced from them. They did not experience the full brainwashing of their national identities, starting with famine and being oppressed with the idea of a non-existent nation, culture, and identity – *You have never been, you are not to be, you are an inferior nation and a premature idea.* Humiliation is truly the only thing that a person from Eastern Europe could have a copyright on—something like “Made in the East.”

And this is how the Eastern Europeans perceive themselves: weak, insecure, non-civilized, yet with some reasoning that makes them move toward the West. This is a syndrome that the Bulgarian scholar Alexander KIOSSEV called the sickness of the “self-conquering nation.” We conquer ourselves in the name of the conquest of a new civilization and culture. We adopt the ideas expressed about us by somebody else about the absence of our own culture, and then we strive for integration into Europe.

**MODEST SEARCH FOR EUROPE**

Let us give to the myth its own and live our own life with our own opportunities and history. The constant knocking on the neighbours’ door, hoping to get there, is not a solution. The search for one’s own identity in a strange place would at best lead to schizophrenia. It is not worth sacrificing our own existence to be considered as a scrap of Europe.

There are hopes that the European myth has some positive tendencies for problem solutions of modern societies. Analyzing the Ancient Greek myth about Zeus having stolen the king’s daughter Europa, we could say that the “European” is the one who is in search of Europe, since Europe is a constant search *per se*. Europe is not just power or prosperity, punctuality or precision. Questioning and willingness to discuss the value not of a result, but of search and striving—this is the Europe we should look for.

**Suggested Reading**

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