Eastern or Central Europe? Discursive Shifts on the Imaginary Map of Europe

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Abstract: *The outcomes of the political and economic transformations in Eastern Europe in the 1990s are elucidated most frequently in terms of the modernization and Europeanization of Eastern Europe, which amounted to the process of internalizing European norms and values. However, one could argue that it also revealed much more deep-seated essential divisions between Europe and Eastern Europe, where the latter represented the distance from and the lack of Europeaness (i.e. the features of the essential and idealized Europe). The following paper will examine if we could think about the process of enlarging the EU in terms of Edward Said's orientalism and power/knowledge practices? Was there a shared logic of otherness that made discourses on Eastern Europe and the Orient to some degree similar? Was the notion of Central Europe a kind of discursive shift on the imaginative map of Europe to relocate itself on the political and imaginative map of Europe?*

Keywords: *EU Enlargement, EU conditionality, Transformation after 1989, East/West dichotomy, Eastern Europe, Postcolonial Theory*

I Introduction

The EU Enlargements of 2004 and 2007 are widely perceived as the successful completion of the final stage in the European integration, thus making Europe 'whole and free'. However, the process of both political transformations and integration efforts in several candidate countries to meet the EU entry conditions revealed a distinction between **Europe** and **Eastern Europe**, where the latter represented the distance from and the lack of Europea-

ness (i.e. the features of the essential and idealized Europe). One could argue that there was a kind of dual framing of Eastern Europe as being simultaneously **in Europe and not yet European**. However, at the same time, the notion of Central Europe circulated successfully in the public discourses in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary. In this regard, the question of identity comes into the limelight and touches upon the very political problems in the 1990s.

The following paper will examine if we could think about the process of enlarging the EU in terms of Edward Said's orientalism and power/knowledge practices? **Is there a shared logic of otherness that makes discourses on Eastern Europe and the Orient to some degree similar?** Was the Enlargement discourse on reuniting Europe to a significant extent underpinned by the orientalist discourse which presupposed **essential difference between Europe and Eastern Europe.** While bearing in our minds all differences between the background of orientalism and the specific context of contemporary East European countries, the article will try to draw on the conceivable parallels on power relations and representational frameworks within which the Orient and Eastern Europe are/were constituted.

We embark on this intellectual quest neither for the sake of argument nor as a provocative rhetorical ploy, but rather because we am deeply convinced that spatial presuppositions and categories like inclusion and exclusion, Self and Other, inside and outside, centre and periphery are still an integral part of politics and that they underpinned to the high degree the politics in the 1990's. We are applying our findings mainly to Poland. However, we believe that it could be applied to other countries in the region, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

II Becoming 'European' — EU conditionality vs. Rule Adoption

The outcomes of the political and economic transformation in Eastern Europe in the 1990s are still being analyzed both in public and academic discourses. They are usually elucidated in terms of the **modernization and Europeanization of Eastern Europe**, which amounted to the process of internalizing European norms and values. They were equated with and codified throughout the course of the European integration in what is known as the Copenhagen Criteria. The assessments of this process vary from the overall positive perspective compared with other transformation processes in the world, through positions claiming that the EU (the West) had a moral obligation to help Eastern Europe, to some claiming that the EU was exploiting its colonial, superior, bargaining power (Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier 2005: 3).

Such a wide range of positions presupposes **the pervasive influence of the EU**. It is usually explained in terms of **EU conditionality**, which focuses on asymmetric, hierarchical power, which enabled the EU to force, and, at the same time, monitor the implementation of the institutional and legal solutions (Sedelmeier, 2005). However, it does neglect the

important internal factors such as the predominant desire of most Eastern European countries to join the EU. Hence, one has to **assess the degree of likelihood of rule adoption by the non-members in the integration process**, not only the external power of the EU to impose its own conditions. We also need to take into account to what degree the candidate countries viewed the 'old' EU as their own aspiration group and how much they were convinced that they shared with them a common identity, values and norms, which are based on democracy, rule of law and market economy (Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier 2005: 19).

We claim that the appearance of EU conditionality alongside the enlargement preparations marked an important shift not only in the modes of the EU governance — a kind of governance through enlargement — but it also left a significant imprint on **the formation of the understanding of the European identity as a land of democracy, rule of law and market economy**. The enlargement helped to consolidate this brand of the essence of Europe, both for the EU-15 and the accession states.

Most importantly, this understanding exerted a significant influence on the accession countries and it seemed to play a crucial role in the likelihood of the rule adoption by the candidates. At the same time, the eager adherence to the EU norms could be seen as addressing **the peculiar need of the Eastern European countries for recognition from the EU** (which was seen as an idealized and essential Europe), not only in terms of fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria, but in the broader, civilisational perspective. As the Polish thinker Jacek Kochanowicz notices '<<the West>> hardly ever agreed to treat Poland as a full member of its community [...] while Poles usually have felt themselves part of the West, they had, at the same time, a problem of not being fully accepted, as well as being treated as somehow inferior' (Kochanowicz 2002). As a result, one could conclude that the accession to the EU was a chance to be 'fully accepted' as a part of the Western community.

At the same time, **political conditionality became a core policy strategy of the EU** to promote its fundamental values and interests. The enlargement was presented as the EU's obligation as well as the commitment to universal values and the spread of political and economic stability across Europe. The EU political conditionality increased the likelihood of rule adoption in the candidate countries, but it was reliant simultaneously on the promise of membership and the threat of exclusion, also in a broader civilisational sense.

As a result, the process of European integration in the late 1990s and early 2000s was pervaded by the opposition of the 'old' EU to its neighbors — Eastern Europe and the distance to the established norms of democracy conditionality and thus Europeanness. It created a specific identity of a 'country in transition' based on the otherness of the Eastern Europe from the EU15 — i.e. Western Europe equated with essential and idealized Europe. Instead of erasing the division Europe-Eastern Europe, the 'Eastern' Enlargement reaffirmed it.

III Eastern or Central Europe?

The research carried out by a Polish think tank — the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) — in several EU member states between 1998 and 2001 measured **the perception of Poland as**

an 'Eastern' country (Kolarska-Bobińska 2003). One could argue that the new criteria and the formalization of the entry conditions for the new member states (including the predominant focus on the implementation of countless legal provisions of *acquis communautaire* as well as the assessment of adherence to democratic norms and values, e.g. the Copenhagen Criteria) stemmed from a commonly shared image of the candidates, including Poland, as 'Eastern' countries. This formalization — i.e. the formation of political conditionality — originated in the common feelings of anxiety among the elites and societies of Western Europe in the 1990s towards the forthcoming accession of Eastern European countries to the EU (Kolarska-Bobińska 2003: 9). To a certain degree, this could be described as **the fear of the unknown**. An IPA survey showed that Eastern Europe was prevailingly depicted as an unknown, half-predictable and half-rational land. In a Western view, it was located on a frontier, acted as a transitional space, 'neither developed nor underdeveloped, neither learnt nor wholly ignorant, but in the process of becoming mature Europeans' (Kuus, p. 476).

However, during the 1990's and 2000's in the public, political and scholarly discourses in the candidate countries, there was a pervasive ambiguity caused by **confusing, intertwining and mixing of the terms of Eastern and Central Europe**, depending on how the political and civilisational goals had been formulated. As indicates by a Canadian human geographer Merje Kuus, it seems like the identity narratives in virtually all Eastern European states, including Poland, framed the eastern border of that particular state as the eastern border of Europe. 'By emphasizing their European credentials, the accession countries sought to shift the discursive border between Europe and Eastern Europe further east and thereby move themselves into Europe' (Kuus: 479).

As a result, they recalled the notion of Central Europe — reconceived in 1984 by a Czech intellectual Milan Kundera (Kundera 1984) — to relocate itself on the political and imaginative map of Europe. Within this gradation Central Europe was closer to an idealized Europe than Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe was closer than Balkan states and Russia, and so on. This fluid nature of Central Europe was aptly captured by Timothy Garton Ash when he provocatively said: 'Tell me your Central Europe, and I tell you who you are' (Garton Ash 1999: 384).

In his essay 'Does Central Europe Exist?' Timothy Garton Ash underscores that there has been a peculiar inclination to attribute to the Central European past what Central Europeans hope will characterize its future. He assesses that 'the confusion of what should be with what was - is rather typical of the new Central Europeanism. We are to understand that what was truly <<Central European>> was always Western, rational, humanistic, democratic, skeptical, and tolerant. The rest was <<East European>>, Russian, or possibly German' (Garthon Ash 1986). As Jacek Kochanowicz points out, the concept of Central Europe was (re)invented by Eastern Europeans themselves: 'the presumption was that some societies within Eastern Europe were more western, or less eastern than others. While these differences were half-forgotten at the early stages of the transformation when everybody shed communism, they reappeared at the end of the present decade [the 1990's — JG], when it became obvious that the transformation record differs sharply across the region' (Kochanowicz 2002).

As Kuus proves, the enlargement discourse envisaged the categorization of Europe into a fully European core and not-yet-fully European Eastern Europe. The interesting question is

how this discourse constructs the accession states as learners and adopters of European norms. The massive learning process employed by Central European politicians and intellectuals — i.e. adherence to the EU conditionality — was predominantly maintained by rhetorical strategies to discursively locate their own countries in 'Europe' by underscoring the differences from their Eastern neighbors.

During the 1990s this categorization became an unspoken premise of the EU enlargement. However, Kuus argues that the process of teaching and learning has simultaneously fueled **a threefold division of the continent into: the European core, the Central European applicants, not yet fully European but in harmony with the European project, and an eastern periphery effectively excluded from membership**. Thus, 'the image of a single Europe has given way to a generalized patchwork Europe with **varying degrees of Europeanness and Eastness**. But the generalized East has remained a defining characteristic of European identity construction' (Kuus: 475). The EU accession became a kind of relocation from Europe's East to Europe proper due to the contrast of Eastern and Western Europe.

In the 1990s the Europeanization of Eastern Europe was treated both in candidate countries and in the EU as a means of preventing the peril of authoritarianism or nationalism. Eastern Europe was presented as being in need of overcoming the 'mental straightjacket' of communism (*homo sovieticus*). As a result, Europeanization was conceived as **a kind of graduation from Eastern Europe to Europe proper**, a process in which the accession countries must have proven that they were 'willing and able' to internalize Western norms. **Therefore, one could ask if the accession to the EU challenged/overcame the East/West dichotomy or if it was a process of aligning itself with the 'right' side.**

IV Approaches to Eastness

The notion of **the East can be seen as a stereotype**, which has been internalized by the West during a long-lasting process of cultural and historical socialization. As the IPA and several other surveys reveal, this stereotypical image of Eastern Europe as not fully civilized and not fully European was embedded in the narratives in Western as well as Eastern Europe (Jasińska-Kania 1996; Siemieńska 2001; Kolarska-Bobińska 2003). On the other hand, **Western Europeans had to address their own fear of the unknown in the 1990s**. Therefore, in order to achieve their ontological safety (Giddens, 1991) they had to 'manufacture uncertainty' by creating a familiar image of Eastern Europe. As Larry Wolff argued, this image was already invented in the 18ᵗʰ century dating back to the Enlightenment (Wolff, 1994), when Eastern Europe was thought as a part of Europe by geography, but still in the process of becoming European. **Eastern Europe became one of generalized 'others' essential for Europe's self-understanding and self-portrayal**.

One might also refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of **prejudices or 'pre-judgments'** (Gadamer 1989). In his illustrious work '*Truth and Method*', Gadamer reworks the idea of prior hermeneutical situatedness. In this vein, the 'fore-structures' of understanding allow something which is to be interpreted to be understood in a preliminary way. As Gadamer

claims, it is mainly due to the fact that our understanding functions in anticipatory structures. This entails that **our understanding always presupposes that what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable.** Hence, it is something that must be constituted as a coherent and reasonable whole. The East seemed to represent a kind of Gadamer's prejudice, which allows the Western understanding of the non-West to function as a kind of 'practical wisdom'.

Finally, the East could be seen in terms of production of difference as Edward Said's orientalism suggested (Said 1994). However, this kind of research mostly takes empirical data from 'non-Western' regions outside Europe. However, as Merje Kuus insists, we could think of **the EU Eastern enlargement in terms of postcolonial theory as long as we remain sensitive to the specific context of today's countries in this region.** There are two ways in which Eastern Europe differs from the contexts in which the bulk of postcolonial theory is set. The double framing of Eastern Europe — as not quite European but situated in Europe — distances it both from (the idealized) Europe and from the Orient. But, on the other hand, Kuus argues that **the shared logic of otherness seems to make the discourses of Eastern Europe and the Orient variant forms of the same kind**. Secondly, the discourse of Eastern Europe is different from orientalism because it is not simply 'the other' outside of Europe. **Rather, Eastern Europe is between the West and the East. It is simultaneously Europe, but not-Europe, the last outpost of Europe and at the same time the doorstep of Europe.**

V Transformation and European Studies Revisited

We believe that it is possible to theorize the EU enlargement in terms of post-colonialism. However, it does not mean to any extent referring to some 'coloniality'. Rather, following Merje Kuus's endeavor, we attempt to invoke a set of theoretical perspectives labeled as 'postcolonial theory'. It will not throw Eastern Europe into generalized non-West, but enable us to situate the enlargement in the production of difference.

We also need to turn to Michel Foucault's approach to power, where the operation of power could be seen best from the borders of its functioning, from the power's margin (Foucault 1977). Therefore, we need to focus on **how the discourse on Europeanness was managed in Europe's power margins**, not only in the centers of power', such as Brussels. Re-inventing the discourse of Eastern Europe alongside the EU Eastern Enlargement could serve as an ideal case for exploration, to see the techniques of power/knowledge relations in governing 'Europe' alongside the enlargement. However, it is also interesting to observe how the opposition of Europe and Eastern Europe was utilized by the accession countries themselves. As Kuus argues, **the discourses of Europe and Eastern Europe are neither imposed on the accession countries, nor do they reflect an authentic East-European view.** They should be seen as a discursive practice of power with othering and essentialization at the central spot.

In Polish academic as well as public discourse, the question of the identity of Poland as an 'Eastern' country has rarely been put under critical consideration and, if so, it was done in a non-systematic way. However, there have already been a few attempts to transfer and conceptualize some of the results of Eastern studies, especially postcolonial arguments, to the Polish conditions (Janion 2006; Thompson 2005, 2006). Nevertheless, they were both used to rehabilitate certain Polish political traditions, namely Slavicness and Sarmatism, and not to reconsider the European identity formation in the 1990s in Poland. Last but not least, there exist some non-scholarly literary attempts to construct a collective Polish image of people behind the eastern border of Poland, which could serve as an example of a popular eastward shift of the civilisational discursive border between Central/Western Europe and Eastern Europe (Masłowska 2002, 2008).

The predominant and the most crucial scholarly literature on the Polish transition period concentrates on several different issues, such as: the reception of liberalism after the collapse of communism (Szacki 1994; Krasnodębski 2003), a critical analysis of the post-communist institutional order (Staniszkis 2001), the role of informal rules in the process of democracy-building in Poland in the 1990s (Wołek 2004), the considerations on the collective historical memory about communism (Śpiewak 2005), the images of Europe in the Polish public discourse (Horolets 2006) and, finally, the critique of a 'sacred' consensus about the directions of the changes in the 1990s and its alleged non-alternative justifications (Żuk 2004; Sierakowski 2007). Within their academic critique, pursuing the consequence of perceiving Poland as a part of Eastern Europe has not been set as a prime objective. Hence, what still seems to **represent a blank space in transformation studies is an integral and comprehensive scholarly analysis of the issue of the 'Eastness' of Poland and other countries of the region in the 1990s in the context of political and economic transformation and Europeanization alongside the accession to the EU.** The author's PhD research project at the University of Warsaw is a part of an endeavor aiming at inscribing this gap in a versatile way.

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