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The “New Eastern Europe”

What to Do with the Histories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova?

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More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, the region is still grappling with the problem of its new identity and the choice of an appropriate name to reflect it. There has been considerable talk about a “return to Europe,” as well as the emergence of a “new Europe” and, as a consequence of the latter, the birth of a “new Eastern Europe.” Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are often viewed as the core of the “New Eastern Europe.” These countries have recently found themselves in a unique geopolitical position, sandwiched between the extended European Union in the west and Russia in the east. They had never been thought to constitute a distinct region and thus had no established group identity. This article explores the question of whether looking at the history of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as that of one region can help us better understand its past and explain its current situation.

Keywords: *Eastern Europe; history; Ukraine; Belarus; Moldova*

More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, the region is still grappling with the problem of its new identity and the choice of an appropriate name to reflect it. There has been considerable talk about a “return to Europe,” as well as the emergence of a “new Europe” and, as a consequence of the latter, the birth of a “new Eastern Europe.” Where is Eastern Europe today? And if it is not where it used to be, where did it go? If you Google “Eastern Europe+Map,” you will get about 11,600,000 results, a reassuring sign that the region is alive and well. But do not expect an easy answer to the question of where it is actually located.

The web will provide you with endless variants, starting with those that treat the region as everything between Prague in the west and the Ural Mountains in the east, and ending with more “modest” proposals, like that of the CIA *World Factbook*, which would limit the region to the former western borderlands of the Soviet Union, from Estonia in the north to Moldova in the south. The confusion is understandable on more than one level. After all, it is no easy matter to determine where Eastern Europe ends if you do not know where Europe per se ends. Europe is not a continent in its own right, and its imagined eastern frontier is constantly on the move. It would

seem, however, that Europe and Eastern Europe are now moving in opposite directions. If “Europe” is becoming more and more coterminous with the European Union, and not with the geographic entity ending at the Urals, then “Eastern Europe,” for its part, is moving not westward but eastward, encompassing the regions left outside the borders of the recently expanded European Union.

The world at large is understandably confused about the meaning of the term “Eastern Europe.” So is the community of experts, whom the general public holds mainly responsible for the persistent confusion. Political scientists and specialists in security studies and international relations, who (unlike historians) have to deal with the region in “real time,” are trying hard to come up with new definitions of the area. Their solution is to fragment the region, dividing it into ever-smaller entities. One result of this development is the eastward extension of Central Europe, which now includes a number of former East European countries whose historians insisted for decades on their East-Central European status. Another outcome is the reinvention of the term “Eastern Europe.” As it went out of fashion among former East Europeans, they passed it on as a kind of intellectual hand-me-down to the East, which has now been reinvented by specialists in international studies as the “New Eastern Europe” (NEE).

The geographic scope of the term depends on the author and his or her location. For the publishers of the journal *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* in Wrocław, the NEE includes almost everything east of Poland. The authors of a position paper on the European Union’s Eastern Partnership, produced in Stockholm, include Ukraine; Belarus; Moldova; and the three Transcaucasian states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in the NEE. A study produced in Austria limits the term to the first three countries, excluding the Transcaucasus. There is clearly a growing tendency to treat Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as the core of the “New Eastern Europe.” These countries have recently found themselves in a unique geopolitical position, sandwiched between the extended European Union in the west and Russia in the east. They had never been thought to constitute a distinct region and thus had no established group designation in the world of international relations. The concept of East-Central Europe, so popular in Poland since the 1950s, failed to fire the imagination of local elites in the NEE. But even outside the region, there is no consensus on whether the countries of the NEE belong to East-Central Europe. If Jerzy Kłoczowski, the most loyal supporter of the East-Central European idea, insists on Ukraine’s belonging to the region, Paul Robert Magocsi includes only west and central Ukraine in his *Atlas of East-Central Europe*.

For better or for worse, “New Eastern Europe” emerges as the only term capable of linking Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova together in their geopolitical no-man’s land. The Baltic states, which are included in the “Eastern Europe” of the CIA *World Factbook*, and the Transcaucasian states, which are included in the “New Eastern Europe” of the EU Eastern Partnership Program, have regional identities of their own. Not so Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. If you partition the old Eastern Europe

between the new Central Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, the Transcaucasus, and, finally, Russia and Central Asia, the residue turns out to be the three countries stuck in between: Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova—the quintessential “New Eastern Europe.”

Looking at the new political map of Eastern Europe, the question one wants to ask is whether there is anything more to this otherwise nameless region than pure geopolitical accident. Some scholars justifiably argue that the NEE identity has been invented outside the region and imposed on it by political developments beyond its control. Others say that talking about these countries as a separate region in historical terms means justifying the current division of Europe and making it all but permanent. There are also voices claiming that a definition of this region as a European rather than a Russian borderland is bound to encourage unwanted bids for EU membership on the part of local elites. I shall leave aside the question of political expediency. What I am interested in here is history and, in particular, the question of whether looking at the history of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as that of one region can help us better understand its past and explain its current situation.

Let us begin by considering whether the immediate past of these three countries contains some common element that differentiates them from their neighbors on the other side of the EU’s eastern border. Indeed it does: a mere twenty years ago they were western borderlands of the USSR. Countries that were not part of the Soviet Union, like Bulgaria and Romania, whose political and economic situation was little better than that of Ukraine or Moldova through most of the 1990s, made it into the European Union, but those of the NEE did not, despite the frantic efforts of Ukrainian governments of the Orange Revolution era to crash the European party. It appears that the internal “iron curtain” between the USSR and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe was more formidable than the outer one that divided the capitalist West from the socialist East.

This explanation would probably suffice were it not for the Baltic states—former Soviet republics that managed to join the European Union. Because the Baltic states are former Soviet republics, the *CIA World Factbook* groups them together with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as constituents of “Eastern Europe.” There are, however, major geographic, cultural, and historical factors that link the NEE countries together while distinguishing them from the Baltic states. The most “primordial” of these is geography. The northern border of the NEE more or less coincides with the watershed between the Baltic and Black Sea basins. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania belong to the Baltic basin; while most of Belarus and all of Ukraine and Moldova belong to the Black Sea basin, with the Dnieper, Dniester, and Prut as their largest rivers. If the Baltic countries have been oriented for centuries toward the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe, the NEE countries have been oriented toward the Black Sea. Throughout history they have occasionally participated in Mediterranean political and cultural developments, but more often than not they were cut off from the Mediterranean world by nomads. The Ottomans, who came to dominate the nomads in the fifteenth century, controlled not only the northern Black Sea steppes but the Black Sea Straits as well.

Thus, although the NEE countries belonged to the Black Sea region, they gained little benefit from the sea, early on becoming Europe's ultimate midlands—an arena of competition among foreign powers. Belarus, located on the Great European plain, found itself on the route of choice for Western armies marching toward Russia and Russian armies marching west. Ukraine became a bone of contention among Poland, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottomans; while Moldavia, long an Ottoman outpost, became Russia's gateway to the Balkans. The contrasting geographic orientations of the countries of the Baltic and Black Sea basins mean that their societies bring different historical experiences to the present and conceptualize the borderlands of the European Union in various ways.

Culture and ethnicity are other important factors that set the countries of the NEE apart from their Baltic neighbors. It suffices to mention religion. If in the case of the Baltics, we are dealing with Catholic and Protestant traditions, which set the region apart from Russia; the dominant religious tradition in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova is Orthodoxy, which links them intimately with Russia's old and new imperial ideology. In the cases of Ukraine and Belarus, there is also the phenomenon of East Slavic proximity, which allows Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to speak of Holy Rus'—an ethno-religious entity that includes Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Where religion and East Slavic identity work together, as in Belarus and eastern Ukraine, the spell of the former imperial center is strongest. Where they do not reinforce each other, as in Moldova and the former Habsburg lands of Ukraine, attachment to Moscow is less prominent or completely nonexistent.

Thus, the NEE is not just a figment of current geopolitical imagination. There are geographic, cultural, ethnic, and historical factors that set it apart from its neighbors. But can history as a discipline and we as its practitioners benefit from this new conceptualization of the old Eastern Europe? I believe so, and I think that historians working in the region will be among the primary beneficiaries of this approach. Now that the Soviet narrative has been largely abandoned, EU prospects denied, and nationalist myths attacked, historians of the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are undergoing confusion and uncertainty. Imagining the history of these three countries as that of a unit will help liberate their historiographies from the isolation imposed by the dominance of local/national, pan-Russian, and pan-Romanian paradigms and contribute to a better understanding of the histories of each individual country and the region as a whole. In countries like Ukraine, history has once again become a battleground between the old Soviet- or Russo-centric narrative and national or overtly nationalist paradigms. Under these circumstances, a new framework for historical analysis can break the existing intellectual deadlock and lead historians and society at large to think about their history in broader and more inclusive terms.

If there is one overriding paradigm that can link the countries of the NEE together and help scholars of the region pose new questions and provide new answers, it is that

of the borderland or the political and/or cultural frontier. Imagining the countries of Eastern Europe as a European frontier or even a bulwark of European civilization to enhance one's European credentials is of course an old device employed, not without success, by the intellectual elites of the "old" Eastern Europe, which now count themselves as part of its Central European core. Tony Judt wrote in this regard that "Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians have all represented themselves in their literature and political myths as guarding the edges of "Europe" (or Christianity). But as a brief glance at map suggests, their claims are mutually exclusive: they can't all be right."¹ In fact they can, if one looks at the map of early modern Eastern Europe, but that is not the point. The point is to move beyond the "defenders of European values" paradigm. The frontier approach, as developed in American and European historiography, allows one to speak about much more than one nation's role in the "defense" of European and Christian values.

It is much more productive to think of the NEE frontier as a meeting place of various states, cultures, and nationalities. Historically, there were at least three types of borders that came together in the NEE region: imperial (Russian, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Commonwealth); cultural/religious, which divided Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism; and ethnic/national. The list of the largest ethnic groups in the region would include, apart from Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Moldovans/Romanians, also Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Crimean Tatars and, last but not least, Russians. These borders were associated with different cultures that met, confronted one another, and negotiated a *modus vivendi*, producing new kinds of meanings and understandings that shaped the region's long-term identity. Here is just one of many examples of such a hybrid identity in the region, which has to do with a religious encounter. In the Middle Ages Catholicism and Orthodoxy met here, producing by the late sixteenth century a hybrid Uniate Church that combined Orthodox ritual with Catholic dogma. In the 1830s that church was liquidated in Belarus by the tsarist authorities, but its successor, the five-million-strong Ukrainian Catholic Church, still exists in Ukraine.

Another cultural encounter in the region was that between Christianity and Islam, which took place as Moldova, the Crimea, and the northern Black Sea steppes all fell under Ottoman tutelage in the fifteenth century. The return of the Crimean Tatars to their ancestral homeland after the collapse of the Soviet Union reintroduced the Islamic factor into the region's politics, reminding us of the importance of the Christian-Islamic encounter in the past. Last but not least, in the sixteenth century the region became a destination of choice for Jews expelled from Western and Central Europe. It is the homeland of some of the best-known Jewish political and cultural figures, including Golda Meir, Leon Trotsky, Abraham Malevich, and Isaac Babel. As part of the Russian imperial Pale of Settlement, it also became the scene of some of the most horrendous crimes against the Jewish population, including pogroms and the Holocaust. Administered at various times by states dominated by Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, Austrians, Romanians, Germans, and Russians, the NEE also became a meeting point

for a variety of administrative systems and political cultures. This encouraged a unique popular adaptability to political change at the top. It is no accident that the region has seen no major upheaval since 1992 (the military conflict in the Transnistria region of Moldova) and that Ukraine and Belarus, the largest countries of the region, have so far avoided major social turmoil and violent conflict altogether.

Did we not know all this before we began thinking about the NEE as a region with a common historical identity? Of course we did, but a new analytical framework makes it possible to see things not seen or neglected previously. Here are two examples of how looking at the region as a whole can help us better understand its individual parts and, indeed, East European history as a whole. The first example highlights the importance of the region not only as a major actor in the history of cultural transfers between Europe's West and East but also between its two Easts: one Slavic, the other Greek or Mediterranean. Although the important role of Eastern Orthodox hierarchs in the region was long stressed by scholars like Ihor Ševčenko and Edward Keenan, it all but escaped the attention of historians focused on cultural relations between Russia and the West. If the NEE countries are considered as a region, one sees more clearly the role of the Greek East and the Mediterranean in the cultural transformation of the "old" Eastern Europe long after its adoption of Christianity. The figure of the seventeenth-century Kyivan metropolitan Peter Mohyla, a Moldavian prince, Polish noble, Ruthenian hierarch, and reformer of world Orthodoxy (he produced the first Orthodox Confession of Faith) is emblematic of the historical importance of the region and its internal and external connections.

The other example comes from the modern era. A focus on national history prevents one from understanding what eventually caused the most profound change in the region, namely, the "closing" of its cultural frontier—in other words, the elimination of its traditional ethnic and cultural diversity. Blaming nationalism alone for this development will not do, given the profound differences in the maturation and aggressiveness of ethnic nationalism in that part of the world. The disappearance of many ethnic and religious minorities from the territory of Belarus can hardly be attributed to the strength of Belarusian nationalism. When we look at the region as a whole, it becomes more apparent that the transformation of the borderland from a multiethnic and multicultural space into an ethnic and cultural monolith was accomplished largely by "outside" powers with strong imperial ambitions. They managed to marshal resources and mobilize the population on a scale unthinkable for the weak national movements of the region, which generally served as junior partners in the cleansing of the borderlands, occasionally undertaken with the tacit or even explicit approval of democratic world leaders. The existing borders of the NEE countries are the best examples of such outside influence. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Holocaust, and the Yalta agreements shaped the new ethnocultural landscape of the region, and we have a better chance of understanding such changes if we think about the region as a unit.

Finally, I would like to address the question of the place that the history of the NEE can or should occupy in university curricula here in North America. It is immediately obvious that the study of the borderlands makes sense only in the broader context of the study of the entities that possessed those borderlands. Thus defined, the study of these borderlands and frontiers illuminates not only their history but also that of the dominant powers, which arguably define themselves best on the margins, at points of encounter with their multiple others. The history of the NEE, then, is best studied within the framework of an Eastern Europe broadly understood—one that includes not only Poland but also Russia. There is probably no better way to understand the frontier than to remove the borders!

Note

1. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York, NY: 2006), 752-3.

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