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Source: New Eastern Europe

New Eastern Europe

Location: Poland

Author(s): Adam Reichardt

Title: Debate: Eastern Europe in World History and Politics
1914-2014
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Issue: 5/2014

Citation style: Adam Reichardt. "Debate: Eastern Europe in World History and Politics 1914-2014". New Eastern Europe 5:54-61.

<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=429963>

Debate: Eastern Europe in World History and Politics 1914-2014

MARK VON HAGEN, YAROSLAV HRYTSAK, ANDREAS KAPPELER
AND FRANK SYSYN

Generally, most people have come to understand what is meant when we refer to “Eastern Europe”. But if one is to actually contemplate the question “Where exactly is Eastern Europe,” then the inconsistencies surrounding this concept slowly begin to emerge. In fact, in the 21st century, the question as to the exact location of Eastern Europe can be answered in many different ways. In Poland and other Central European countries, Eastern Europe is today believed to exist somewhere east of the EU borders. However, if you go further west (still within the European Union) you can easily find Europeans who see Eastern Europe starting somewhere east of Germany. Hence, Eastern Europe is not easily geographically defined; it comes across as a region without borders, which, in turn, begs the question – is it still correct to use the term “Eastern Europe”?

The etymological meaning of Eastern Europe shows us that a re-conceptualisation of a geographical and

political concept is a process that is most often not undertaken consciously and requires time. Clearly, referring to Eastern Europe as a bloc of countries situated to the east of Germany (or Poland) is inaccurate – economically, politically, geographically and socially. It has become outdated to use the term “Eastern Europe” to refer to as “otherness”, or something that is between Europe and the orient.

Today, in the context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it has become even more obvious that we need to find a new framework to understand our common reference points when describing the region. History does not allow us to consistently label this region. The question is: would it not be too difficult, even impractical, to stop using the term altogether?

The debate titled Eastern Europe in World History and Politics 1914-2014, which was held in Lviv on September 12th 2014, was meant to deliberate this concept from various perspectives: historical,

political and geographical, in the context of Ukraine. Obviously, this debate did not answer the question of “Where is Eastern Europe?”, but its record may provide some reference points for anyone who wants to better understand the greater meaning of Europe.

“Eastern Europe” – An outdated concept

Andreas Kappeler: Until the beginning of the 19th century, the division between east and west was not of much importance on the European mental map. In fact, the division was one between north and south. The south encompassed the civilised world; the countries that were rooted in ancient Greece and Rome and which included Italy, Greece and Spain. On the other side were the “barbarians” who lived in the north: Sweden, Poland, Russia and so on. It was only in the first half of the 19th century that the new use of “Eastern Europe” as a backward antipode of the “civilised west” became more common.

In the German-Swiss-Austrian branch of the academic world, we have a long tradition of understanding the term “Eastern Europe” as referring to all the regions east of Germany, all the way to the Urals. In fact, we include Russia in this notion of Eastern Europe, unlike in other academic traditions such as the United States. For a long time now, we have divided Eastern Europe into three sub-regions: East-Central Europe; South-Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe in a narrow sense. Seemingly, for historians,

this notion is only an instrument of research. Therefore, I would argue for this pragmatic use of the geographic understanding; and not the normative terms “East” and “Eastern Europe”. In this sense Eastern Europe includes Russia. Clearly, we have to divide Europe into more than west and east. At the same time, however, we have to be aware that these divisions are fluid, as they permanently change with time.

Frank Sysyn: We have more than just one concept of Eastern Europe. The idea of East-Central Europe, as mentioned, could be seen as a part of “Central Europe”, which in the Polish understanding stretches to Białystok. The North American tradition is largely influenced by Oskar Halecki’s book, *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe*, written in 1950. Halecki, whose family roots can be traced to Volhynia, was very interested in showing that those territories which might be called the eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, that is Ukraine and Belarus, were not a part of the same civilisational sphere as Russia. It was because of Halecki that the term “East-Central Europe” took hold in the United States, above all by the formation of an institute at the Columbia University called the Institute on East Central Europe. If we look elsewhere, we see Jaroslav Bidlo – a Czech historian – who gave a very different vision of Eastern Europe pointing to religious civilisational blocs. In my view, the issue of Central Europe is essential to any

vision of what we are going to do with the term Eastern Europe.

A key part of this debate is whether the Russian-Ukrainian war has changed our vision and understanding of the region. It has clearly shown us that we need a more nuanced view of regions. Even our understanding of regions inside regions needs to be reconsidered. For example, the northern part of Luhansk Oblast is Slobozhanschyna (Sloboda Ukraine), and we have learned that Slobozhanschyna behaves very differently from the southern part of that region. This example shows us that the most eastern oblast of Ukraine has a certain social and cultural tradition that unites it with territories to the rest of Ukraine.

Halecki had proposed the concept of a “Central Europe”, consisting of its eastern and western parts. But the idea of West-Central Europe never took hold (that would have been Germany). Conversely, East-Central Europe did take on a life of its own. It now equates to being in a privileged club that gets you into the European community.

Yaroslav Hrytsak: It is true that the idea of Eastern Europe is based on perception. A key argument made by Larry Wolff, author of *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, is that this concept was invented and since it was invented, it does not exist.

I do not particularly agree with this point of view. It takes a reading of Herodotus to understand that the “East-West” division is as old as the

“North-South” division. It is just that until modern times, the former did not matter that much as the latter. Secondly, Eastern Europe is something that is very tangible. Ask any driver crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border if Eastern Europe exists. The moment you cross the border, you immediately see the difference in the quality of the roads. That is why the most visible criteria that could be used nowadays to determine where Eastern Europe starts would be GDP per capita or other related indices that reflect standards of living. I realise that similar criteria with similar consequences could be applied to other European peripheries, like Portugal or the Balkans, and discourses on Eastern Europe smacks of Orientalism. Still, when it comes to tangible criteria it does not make Eastern Europe less “Eastern”.

In many ways, the reason why “Eastern Europe” is seen as a pejorative term is because, as Larry Wolfe noted, it refers to underdevelopment and backwardness. This negative association with the term is thus now a challenge for countries such as Ukraine.

Mark von Hagen: There is an earlier version of the concept of a “New Eastern Europe”; a British invention by historian Robert Seton-Watson in the early 20th century. Seton-Watson was an advocate of Czechoslovak and Polish independence and helped influence Woodrow Wilson’s ideas about Eastern Europe after the First World War. This means that the last time we heard about a “New Eastern Europe” was at the end of the First World

War and the Treaty of Versailles, which came to be seen as not just as peace, but rather as a continuation of empire which eventually led to the Second World War.

It was then in 1989 when Mikhail Gorbachev called for a common European home stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. This brings us to reflect on what Europe really means today and the competing ideas of what Europe is. Europe has always been an ideal, a utopia, a project and a work in progress. What we have seen recently in Ukraine illustrates these competing notions of a European order. On the one hand, there is a Europe based on social democratic values that is cosmopolitan, with open borders and an inclusive democratic idea. On the other hand, there is the new right-wing understanding, which is not so new if you go back to the world order of fascism and Nazism. This idea is based on conservative values and the preservation of order and discipline. These competing “Europes” overlay all of the regional differences. The EuroMaidan Revolution and the Russian-Ukrainian war illustrate that Ukraine is now a battleground of these two visions of Europe.

Nationalism in the context of Ukraine and Eastern Europe

Mark von Hagen: Nationalism is different in every country. The West has its own forms of nationalism. If we look at the more global problems of defining nations in the European Union – the issue of migration and refugees are now challenging the notions of nationalism.

The nation-state as we know it has always been a stabilising force. But today, with global capitalism which makes the states less in control of their own borders and what happens inside these borders, as well as less able to satisfy the welfare needs of their populations, we see that states are no longer efficient as a result of broader global forces. This is a very new feature of the world and this explains why nationalism takes different forms, as well as why it is not enough of an explanation to understand our context.

Andreas Kappeler: We do have to admit, however, that the understanding of nationalism is very important to the Ukrainian context. We have a strong stereotype of Ukrainian nationalism and antisemitism in Western Europe, which has its roots in the early 20th century and was spread by the Soviet propaganda. Admittedly, this stereotype is alive today. It is used by Russian propaganda in order to prove the so-called fascist character of the current Ukrainian regime.

Today, extremist far-right nationalism can be found in almost all European countries. It is present in France, the Netherlands, Austria and Ukraine. Therefore, we can assume that approximately 10 to 20 percent of the European population are adherents of an extreme nationalism. Considering the present situation in Ukraine, the growth of extremist nationalist groups becomes more explicit, mainly because of the conditions of war. I am deeply concerned by the growth of these extremist groups on both the Russian and the Ukrainian

sides. My fear is that if these extremist groups in Ukraine are accepted as partners in the government, it would be very difficult to get rid of them. For Ukraine, this would become a big obstacle for Europeanising that country. Europe will never accept these groups in power.

Frank Sysyn: However, Europe accepts them in power in Hungary, and it accepts them in running provinces in Austria. I agree that the issue of nationalism is very important in the context of Ukraine's acceptance in Europe. But we need to clearly define what is meant by nationalism. There are many ways to understand nationalism, from radical, extremist, xenophobic, intolerant groups as opposed to groups who believe that their nation is an important part of their value system. When describing Ukraine, we have established a category called "Ukrainian nationalists". This category means that if you think Ukrainian is a language, you are a Ukrainian nationalist. And you get the same title as a person who might be xenophobic, antisemitic and authoritarian.

Yaroslav Hrytsak: It is better to use the term nationalism in plural rather than in singular form. I believe that separating nationalism based on an east-west divide is counterproductive. Hans Kohn, with his book on nationalism, was probably the first to create this division between nationalisms. Kohn argues that western nationalism is apparently civilised, versus a Ukrainian or eastern nationalism which is bloody, xenophobic and antisemitic. I believe that this division is not valid

anymore in contemporary academic discussions.

However, we have to discuss the role of nationalism seriously, as it played a critical role in Ukraine. If we compare the EuroMaidan Revolution to other mass protest movements, such as the Occupy movement, we realise that in many ways these are similar phenomena. What is more, it is more justified to compare the EuroMaidan with the Occupy movement than to compare it with the 2004 Orange Revolution. The reason for comparing Ukraine's last revolution with the western protest movement is because similar groups were active in these events – the new middle class and the younger generation. The major difference between the EuroMaidan and the Occupy movement, or even the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the Bolotnaya protests in Moscow, is that the EuroMaidan managed to win. The main reason for this victory, which makes it very distinctive from other protests, is the national dimension of the EuroMaidan. Without nationalist groups like Pravyi Sektor (the Right Sector) or Svoboda, the EuroMaidan could have continued endlessly and have suffered the same fate as the Occupy movement or the Bolotnaya protesters. We cannot discount the role of the nationalist groups in the EuroMaidan Revolution. However, their political popularity shows that they do not have mainstream appeal. In the recent presidential elections in Ukraine, the two nationalist candidates, Oleh



Photo: Iwona Reichardt

Lviv, September 12th 2014. In order from left to right: Adam Reichardt (*New Eastern Europe*), Andreas Kappeler, Frank Sysyn, Yaroslav Hrytsak and Mark von Hagen.

Tyahnybok of Svoboda and Dmytro Yarosh of Pravyi Sektor, fared very poorly – they even fell behind the leader of the Jewish Congress in Ukraine. Here is the irony of the situation that has been noted by a Russian observer: nationalists can make a revolution succeed – but they cannot win over a revolution.

Mark von Hagen: It is not just Ukrainians who have a nationalist trait; Russians are also regarded as nationalist. There is concern, for example, among the Tatars in Russia that the increasing Russian nationalism is affecting Russian-Tatar relations. There will be some backlash to Putin because of the strong nationalism that he has encouraged.

Outlook for post-war Ukraine using history as a guide

Andreas Kappeler: Looking at the Russian-Ukrainian war, I think the example of Yugoslavian wars can

be illuminating. The Bosnian war, for example, had disastrous consequences and there has been no modernisation since.

We can look also at other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These conflicts have remained frozen and have not become an opportunity for post-war modernisation. So, I would not agree with the thesis that the Russian-Ukrainian war has any positive impact on the Ukrainian society. The war, instigated by Russia, led to the destabilisation of Ukraine, to the death of thousands of people and to a rise of extremist groups. It continues to divide the Ukrainian society living in different parts of the country.

Frank Sysyn: I would not say that war is a good thing or that death is a good thing, indeed these are terrible things. But when we observe what is happening in Ukraine, perhaps it is possible to identify some positive outcomes. First, there is the consolidation of parts of the south and

east of Ukraine, as some of them have chosen Ukraine over Russia. We have had an expansion of what Ukrainian identity is and finally a recognition that Russian speakers in Ukraine can be a part of the Ukrainian identity and the acceptance of this by people in the western and central parts of the country. We see tremendous growth in the number of people who believe in Ukrainian independence and statehood. The war has played a role in all these.


The other issue is relations with Russia. The EuroMaidan Revolution and the war in eastern parts of the country illustrate that the Ukrainian society has rejected the idea of Eurasia as its civilisational sphere. Similarly, the idea of religious civilisation or the Orthodox Church as somehow in opposition to Europe has been rejected by considerable groups of followers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is under the Moscow Patriarchate.

Yaroslav Hrytsak: We could talk about a Serbian-Croatian scenario in Ukraine, if Kharkiv, Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk would be on the other side. Then, we would have the country split in two. Luckily enough, this scenario has collapsed. If you go to Dnipropetrovsk you will see the flags and pro-Ukrainian atmosphere which is very reminiscent of Lviv of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Recent surveys show that the strongest support for the “anti-terrorist operation” in Donbas is in the neighbouring Dnipropetrovsk region. An irony is that nowadays the most divisive line in Ukraine now seemingly runs along

the border between the Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk regions.

The comparison of the situation in Ukraine to the Serbian-Croatian scenario can be made only in terms of a warning about what could happen in the east of Ukraine. But we have to be careful in regards to this comparison. The territory that is trying to separate from Ukraine is only a part of Donbas, not even the whole region. There is no region in Ukraine that favours the idea of separation from Ukraine. The largest support for separatism is registered in Donbas. Still, even there those who want to separate make up a minority of 30-33 per cent. This confirms the conclusions reached by many scholars that despite all odds, Ukraine has been relatively stable. It calls for a shift of focus on our discussions in and on Ukraine: we need to care more on political and economic reforms than on issues of identity. In fact, the Ukrainian nation does not need to be built because it already exists. It just needs to be modernised.

Mark von Hagen: If we draw some parallels from 100 years ago and today; Ukraine was one of the first states to benefit from the new doctrine of national self-determination proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson and confirmed by most Europeans after the First World War. Ironically enough, it was Ukraine that became one of the first victims of that policy as well. We have a similar situation today. The EuroMaidan has become a symbol of Ukrainians challenging Europeans and the EU to stand behind

what they claim as “European values”. The EuroMaidan activists have demonstrated that they were, in some ways, more European than the Europeans. 

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