

On and off the border of Europe

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Estonia has always lived on the border of Europe, mentally and physically. Since the Enlightenment, Eastern Europe has been understood as a geographic part of Europe, yet in the perpetual process of *becoming European*. As such, Eastern Europe has provided the largely West European-dominated “European self” with an important foil-figure: it has functioned as a sort of surrogate, or a more rustic version of it. Accordingly, the contents of “Europe” in the European Union, as well as of its foreign and security policy outlook, have been tilted towards its Western half. While already the first conventions for European unification in the immediate aftermath of World War II called for the unity of “nothing less than all Europe”, the actual project of European unification excluded those parts on the other side of the Iron Curtain, relegating them to the inevitable “second league of Europe”. Despite solemn proclamations to refuse to accept the “artificial division” of Europe into two parts, Eastern European nations were nevertheless destined to be latecomers into the common European project. Not so inevitably perhaps, they have consequently been regarded as eternal neophytes, who are unable to ever fully close the gap separating them from “true Europeanness”.

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After centuries of lingering in this curious liminal zone, neither Western nor Eastern enough to be considered as wholly part of one or the other, Estonia has now become a full member of the Euro-Atlantic security community. Yet it seems, at times, that our sense of “marginal Europeanness” persists. This is so in spite of our completion of the passage of the formal initiation phase of becoming part of institutionalised Europe, or crossing the threshold from a candidate country to a full-fledged member of the EU and NATO.

Why is this the case? Are we suffering from some dreadful “East European borderline condition“?

Having been historically constructed as a “betwixt and between“ place in the mental map of Western Europe, it is hardly a wonder that accession to the EU has not constituted a panacea *per se* for Estonians’ self-perception as marginal Europeans. This must be the case given that the contestability of our “European credentials“ has not disappeared even with our passage through the pre-accession phase. The questioning of Eastern European newcomers’ “European subjectivity“ has merely become more subtle. Instruction by our Western European counterparts has become slightly less obvious after the accession to the Union than it was during the initial rituals of the enlargement phase.

The regular appearance of the more recent variations on the “Europe but not quite Europe“ metaphor among Western European foreign policy makers, media and public intellectuals confirms that Eastern and Western Europe continue to be each other’s significant, though ambivalent, others even in the post-dual enlargement era. There is an “immature“, “modernist“ and “Hobbesian“ “new Europe“ presented against a “grown-up“, “post-modernist“ and “Kantian“ “old“ one, implying an ethical and rational hierarchy of cultures in Europe, and subsequently conceptualising the relationship between Western and Eastern Europe as that of teachers and students.

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The reaction of Estonians and other Eastern Europeans to this hierarchy has been a mixture of acceptance and resistance. On the one hand, Western Europe has been regarded as an example to follow in Eastern Europe, an idealised “other“ whose recognition of Eastern Europeans’ “Europeanness“ has been considered the ultimate condition for the latter’s self-perception as “European“. Importantly, without Western recognition of our Europeanness both in the civilisational sense of the term, as well as in being granted acceptance to the institutions that have come to embody Europeanness in today’s world, our vulnerable geopolitical position would allow only for very modest manoeuvring space in which we could exercise our “personality“ in international politics.

On the other hand, however, the perpetual process of becoming European has engendered a sense of despair, abandonment and resentment among Eastern Europeans, as if they have somehow “lost“ the chance to properly belong to the West, and hence never quite arrived at what their innermost desires want them to be part of. Accordingly,

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Hence, while for us our process of “becoming European“ has been, in the Nietzschean vein, our “becoming of what we are“, or what we have considered ourselves to be in the first place, it has nonetheless been carried along by the undercurrent of seeking the “old European’s“ recognition of our “Europeanness“ in order to complete this identification. The Estonians understand themselves to be Europeans, and have historically needed to prove this against the “old European’s“ divergent perspective on the matter. Our politics of becoming European have therefore essentially been conditioned by the misalignment between our particular forms of self-regard and that which the “Europeans proper“ hold for us. After all, for most of the European institutions’ post-Cold War enlargement processes to the east, Eastern Europe was regarded more as a problem to be solved or a security emergency to be confined than a dialogue partner to be listened to, without acknowledgement of the region’s significance as a mental and practical counter-foil for Western Europe’s own identity constructions.

The very experience of Eastern European “Europeanness“ as “potential Europeaness“, as well as the more recent and clearly demarcated liminal experience of candidanship to the Euro-Atlantic security community, has been constitutive of our self-positioning in the common European foreign and security policy field. The self-imposition of the “Europe, but not quite Europe“ conceptualisation is generally conspicuous in the Baltics’ as well as Poland’s sense of marginalisation in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), especially when it comes to Russia.

However, the tendency to resist the depiction of Eastern Europeans as “not yet quite Europeans“ is clearly on the rise. We can observe it in the context of their initiatives towards the Eastern neighbours of the enlarged Union, and in their attempts to integrate their different experiences from World War II into the respective pan-European collective remembrance. These increasingly vocal claims for “equal subjectivity“ in European affairs bespeak of a growing sense of confidence about the closeness of our ties to the Euro-Atlantic security community. It is furthermore probable that the Eastern Europeans’ increasing recalcitrance to the status of “marginal Europeans“

indicates that an enlarged European community would be less dominated by its traditional centre and witness growing self-imposition of the Eastern European periphery on the Western European centre. Poland's stubborn self-positioning *vis-à-vis* the EU Reform Treaty, demanding for itself almost as big a vote in the Union as allocated to far-more-populous Germany, is a paradigmatic example of the kind.

If it is not too far of a stretch, we could enlarge Michel de Certeau's metaphor of "the immigrant" to the whole of the post-Cold War Eastern European process of becoming European, as the immigrant is simultaneously different from and yet resembles the original inhabitants of a community. Analogous to immigrants, Estonia and the other Eastern European nations have been historically placed by their "senior European peers" at the point connecting two worlds, forcing them to practice several languages and cultures at a time. For the "old Europe", these "new Europeans" have also provided vivid proof of the possibility of moving between the past and the present, "the here and the elsewhere", of inventing equivalent codes and organising systems of translation. Similar to the immigrant's ability to test the society he/she has entered into, these "new Europeans" have also put the old EU "core" to the test, trying out the latter's capacity to tolerate the (minor) deviations from its previously existent norms and traditions.

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A sense of scepticism nevertheless looms large amongst the so-called "new Europeans", fuelled by fear that although the old boundaries of distinction between the East and West of Europe are now officially gone, the new mental lines of distinction are nevertheless lingering under the smooth surface of a new Europe. This unease, finding ample support from the proliferating arguments for a "Europe of different speeds", would leave the Eastern European EU newcomers still at the border of those new boundaries, half-in-half-out of the modern European polity. Then again, the ever edgier Europe as a whole has been regarded as a borderland *per se* rather than an entity that "has" borders. For instance, the French political philosopher Étienne Balibar has described Europe as a "superposition of borderlines", or of heterogeneous relations to other histories and cultures of the world which are reproduced within its own.

One way or the other, the persisting European division along the Western-Eastern line (whatever its current expression – "old" vs. "new", "modern" vs. "postmodern" Europe) is deeply problematic for the forging of a more coherent and representative European consciousness and identity, not to mention a common foreign and security political outlook for the enlarged Union of 27 members. After the EU's enlargements

to the east, the meaning of “Europe“ is essentially about to be re-defined. Estonia’s and other Eastern European EU-newcomers’ escape from the status of liminal characters in the EU’s self-image as a post-modern security community would require a radical reconsideration of the historically West-centric European identity.

What we need today, therefore, is a conscious push of the limits of thinking about “Europe“ and a more comprehensive approach to the contents of post-war European history: a re-imagining of the traditionally belittled and scientifically objectified Eastern Europe as a dynamic, complex and potentially inspiring participant in the common European project, which subsequently helps create a more polyphonic scene for articulating and discussing identity and security in the enlarged European community. Further recognition should be given to Eastern Europeans’ distinct historical

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The conceptualisation of “Europe“ has to shift towards embracing more of the whole of Europe, looking further eastwards from the traditional French-German integration engine and recognising the responsibility of both Eastern and Western Europe for the success of the project of a “united Europe“. At the end of the day, as the late Edward Said reminds us, identity constructions are bound up with dispositions of power and powerlessness in each political community and therefore are not merely exercises in academic wool-gathering, but urgent social contests with concrete political issues at hand.