



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW

Faculty of Philosophy

International Conference:

Re-writing Cultural Geography: Toward a New Meaning of Eastern Europe

Department of Philosophy of Culture

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw

8-10.12. 2023

The aim of the conference is a philosophical reconceptualization of the category of Eastern Europe as a particular cultural form, i.e., a specifically determined way of living, experiencing, and self-understanding, localized in a certain *space*. The existing geographical, political, economic and even culturalist categorizations seem to be incoherent, often mixing criteria brought together from completely different dimensions. This is mainly because they seem to simply miss the *essence* of the phenomenon. It is therefore of the utmost importance to provide/work out a set of philosophical concepts that will allow us to gain a deeper insight into the category in question; and either to maintain and defend it or cross it out from our vocabularies as no longer relevant. Provisionally, what we want to understand as Eastern Europe are the countries which are situated at the outskirts of what is commonly called Western Europe and as such, for centuries and until today, they have been constantly confronted with the paradoxical cultural formation that poses a constant deadly threat to all neighboring states and ethnicities – a non-being that is neither European nor Asian, nor even a coherent synthesis of the two, i.e., Russia (until almost the end of the XVIII century commonly recognized as not belonging to Europe). So, what we provisionally want to call Eastern Europe somehow coincides with all the lands, peoples, ethnicities which either were a part of (for a longer or shorter period of time) what was once called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or maintain vital, creative cultural relations with it: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus. Despite all the weaknesses of this state (e.g., social-political injustice, cultural colonialism), which have given rise to many legitimate controversies, there are many reasons why this state can, or even

should be considered exceptional; among these reasons are certainly: the way the political was established; the most fundamental concepts by means of which the active participants in this realm made sense of who they were in terms of their status and their way of life; cultural, religious, ethnic (and linguistic) inclusiveness/openness; the form of a pre-modern nation and the trajectory according to which it was created. Many of these achievements had to be transgressed (and rightly so) in the course of emancipatory social movements and the processes of creating modern nation-states. But at the same time the dramatic, long-lasting confrontation with Russian imperialism (first in the form of the tsarist despotism and the Russian Empire then as the Soviet Union) led not only to the destruction of this cultural legacy, but also to the emergence of the cultural “walls” between the peoples inhabiting these lands. These “walls” were reinforced by (for the most part externally induced) hostility, distrust, different forms of resentment, the destruction of the social capital – both between the states and within them – and so forth. But they constituted yet another layer of what we may call, slightly paraphrasing Milan Kundera, the “community of history and experience.” It seems that this community – with all its positive and negative aspects – calls for a systematic, joint, multi-perspectival philosophical analysis, where the philosophers from all these countries will be equally represented.

The category of Eastern Europe is historical. It is so in a threefold sense: First, it is deeply rooted in its own history and cultural legacy, which can be for the most part forgotten, repressed, no longer considered as relevant, but is still constitutive for our identities. Second, it emerged at a particular moment in history as a cultural response to a very specific geopolitical situation. Moreover, this situation was rooted in the epistemological dimension – the emergence of the Humboldtian ideal of university and along with it a particular self-understanding of modern academic disciplines took place in the times when the states to which we refer were reduced to the level of colonial peripheries. This has had long-lasting consequences for the status of these states reflected in the marginalization of their voice, in their striking underrepresentation in the processes of creation of modern European *episteme*. Third, it indicates a unique form of historicity – i.e., the ways we live through and work through our historical determinations and predicaments. But even if it is impossible to detach this category from its historical grounding, the philosophical analysis should not be limited to the historical perspective.

The category of Eastern Europe should be conceived not so much in geographical terms but rather in symbolic ones – simply put it is a symbolic formation. Or to put it differently – it is a

topographical and *ethical* category. It has been constituted by and through a particular *topos*, a *topos* within which Europeanness, has for centuries, been exposed to, and confronted with the otherness, where Europeanness has constantly balanced between excentric and centric positions. This *topos* has provided conditions of possibility for unique ways of experiencing space and time, ourselves and others, home and what is beyond. It had its darker side, which took various forms of being haunted by “Russianness” expressed in actions and behaviors undermining, often quite effectively, the ideals of civil society. It has also had its specific vacuum space or blind spots expressed in futile, reactive idealization and romanticization of its own cultural legacy. But more importantly this *topos* was, for a long time, expressed in creative approach to borders, in the tolerant co-existence of different ethnicities and religious denominations, in deliberative forms of the social and the political (e.g., the Warsaw Confederation of 1573, the democracy of the noblemen, the military democracy of Cossacks). As much as it was articulated in the spirit of resistance and dissent whenever the social and the political were radically alienated either by external invaders or by internal political forces (e.g., the tradition of uprisings and rebellions, the Solidarity movement, the uncompromising spirit of resistance in the Baltic countries under the Soviet rule, the Ukrainian revolutions). All of this was (and still is, as we believe) expressive of a particular way of life, a particular *ethos* driven by the ideals of freedom, equality, consensus, sovereignty of people; and actualized in a kind of cultural flexibility, hybridity, polyphony. This *ethos* is grounded – largely because of the dramatic twists and turns of our history – in a constantly renewed activity of self-questioning and self-searching, in a persistently recurrent will of self-determination.

To what extent is this *ethos* still expressive of who we are today? Can we still speak of a historically determined *sensus communis* which would be a basis for unity among the peoples of Eastern Europe? Can this category inform us about our possible futures? Can it serve as something differentiating us from Western Europe? Or are we already living in a completely unified Europe that leaves no room for local forms of self-understanding; a Europe that excludes any real differentiation? Jacques Derrida expressed the ideal of Europe with the phrase “one but many.” We would like to follow this way of thinking. There is this “community of experience and history,” that clearly distinguishes the peoples of Poland, Ukraine, Baltic countries, Belarus from other parts of the continent. The question is whether this community is willing to speak with its own voice. Following Derrida’s phrase, we should go even a little further – the community we are talking about is itself fundamentally marked by manyness. It is a unity in difference, a differentiated unity.