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GEOPOLITICAL NAMING AND METAGEOGRAPHY IN THE EAST OF EUROPE

Abstract:

Modern geography is considered to be a methodologically weak discipline. One of the aspects of this weakness is the inability to properly define many common geographical terms, often used in literature, the media at large, in colloquial language and in scientific discourse as well. Thus the weaker the position of geography as a science, the stronger the influences of metageography. There where there exists a deficit of geographical study, metageographic constructs begin to appear. Such concepts begin to blur the true picture of geographical reality, continuing its limited understanding as pertains to regions and countries, which in turn may lead to conflict and missteps within both economic and political realms. The aim of this study then, is to arrive at proper definitions of what constitutes "Poland" and "Europe", as well as their exact localizations, since the understanding of both concepts have been deformed by the false premises of metageographic concepts.

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Introduction: geography and metageography

Geography is the science which examines how people interact with the Earth upon which they live and how they order their lives... creating for themselves places. The existence of places is a direct result of the shaping by man of the Earth's surface and stands as the *raison d'être* for the study of geography. Places exist only as a consequence of human presence. They are the creations of man, who forms them, giving them certain traits, functions and meanings, treating them as his own or as foreign entities, distant or hospitable, unsafe, pleasant or repulsive. They may be valuable to him or relatively passive in meaning.

The character of place depends upon how people organize their common life in particular localizations. English literature speaking about place, refers to it as the manner of dwelling together, while the classical French tradition of geography advances the expression *genre de vie*. When speaking of place, much depends upon the existing conditions and upon the resources that certain local societies have at their disposal, and how they use them for the shaping of the surrounding terrain. This especially includes any economic or technical means available to them. It follows then, that the scope and manner of the usage of these resources, is in effect a result of culturally conditioned preferences and methods of interaction with the existent biophysical surroundings as well as with the other people.

Places then are examined in geography according to various categorizations. For example: they may be examined under the category of country landholdings or factory districts, townships or parishes, Upper Silesia or Volhynia. They may constitute particular countries and regions and most notably Earth itself as the dwelling place of all people. Places exist then, in as much as they possess their own names, identities, internal cohesiveness, and series of traits resulting from their individual character or defined *qualité maîtresse*. It is necessary to add that places are something relatively constant even when the surrounding landscape finds itself in a process of rapid change due to economic and societal development, especially in the area of technology. At times places exist on as entities which go against the grain of such processes, slightly adjusting their character. It is necessary to admit however, that such processes of change, deeply influence the character of particular places, and in turn radically change the face of the entire Earth. Because of this, some places are destined to be extinguished and for sure will disappear, as for example the hallowed forests and shrines of the pagan gods. But the most radical predictions of the apocalyptic standardization of the Earth's surface which was to accompany globalization and the new cultural uniformity of the world, along with the vision of the "death of geography", are not coming to pass.

Since the shaping of the surface of the Earth is going forward continually forming new places, it is imperative that these new places

become the subject of new scientific study. Such study is the interest of the discipline of geography. In the beginning phases of research activity, geographers attempt to realize two main goals. The first goal is to localize a given place or expanse. The goal of the second is to define its specific traits, functions and meanings. Only in later phases of examination does one begin to analyze specific phenomena and processes, which actually decide these functions and traits. In reality both of the above mentioned goals are interconnected in that the functions and traits of places, to large extent result from their localization. The general goal of this paper is to realize the two goals mentioned above as they relate to the existing places of Poland and Europe. For it seems that just as in the case of many other names and concepts, modern geography has failed in this attempt and has not been able to properly define either of the two terms. It could be just one of the main reasons that this discipline 'is so little learned' in spite of the fact that it does matter (McDougall, 2003).

Questions as to the location and geographical traits of Poland and Europe may seem surprising since the answers to these questions are contained in text books universally used in schools. They are however not questions of a purely rhetorical nature. In the present time, when precision of the spoken and written word is disappearing, and when words are often used not to express truth, but instead to hide the truth, the terms "Poland" and "Europe" are very often used in an entirely improper way. In relation to the question concerning the

localization of Poland, it is universally accepted that she finds herself in Europe. But Europe is a much larger entity than Poland and is also very diversified and disjunct. For this reason it is necessary to answer the question as to Poland's place in Europe, by pointing the part of Europe to which Poland belongs. It is exactly on this point that opinions diverge with some researchers concluding that Poland belongs to "Western Europe", while others define her as belonging to "Eastern Europe". Still others advance the view of Poland belonging to "Central Europe" or to "East Central Europe".

Still complicating the matter is the fact that many authors, among them journalists, reporters and even geographers themselves, often seem to think that "Europe" is a synonym for the European Union, or the continent which goes under the same name. And yet, the European Union is a political creation, while the idea of a continent is a geological categorization. The term "Europe" however is above all a geographical name. This is why in order to find the answer to the question concerning the true meaning and scope of what "Europe" is, one must look specifically to geographical study. An inherent problem as we do so however, (unlike with other so called Earth Sciences as geography is universally categorized in Poland), is the fact that there exist within geographical terminology many terms possessing multiple meanings and unclear definitions and terms, all of which can be understood in differing ways. The inclusion of geographical studies within the realm of Earth Sciences should

obligate us, to take special care in preserving linguistic precision, (since the above mentioned sciences also belong to the Natural Sciences). And yet, paradoxically, the discarding of geography's humanistic identity and its recognition as a natural science, has not resulted in increased precision in the area of geographical terminology. Therefore even the terms "Europe" and "Poland" are names of undefined meaning and scope. In spite of the fact that the literature on the concept of Europe is voluminous, to deliver an unequivocal answer to the question of 'what is Europe?' seems to be impossible for the authors of contemporary publications. E.g. such answer is unavailable for editors of the well known collections of studies concerning what people have thought about Europe: 'Any discussion of what constitutes "Europe" however, is problematic, for "Europe" is an undefined actor, lacking autonomy over a homogeneous, clearly bordered space' (Maxine 2008).

Because modern geography often fails in its task to define common terms and names (such as "Poland" and "Europe"), it is important to note that these terms and concepts are essential for the proper functioning of society, for the proper understanding of communal texts, ideas used in the media and in literature, and in colloquial language as well. And there, where there is a lack of the study of geography or where such study is stunted, metageographic concepts appear which are effectively absorbed into the communal awareness of a given society and which complicate and blur the true

picture of reality (Lewis & Wigen 1997). And so it was with the localization of Poland in Europe and the definition of their territorial reaches. Although, from the formal point of view, Polish society is characterized by a high level of competency in the area of geographical studies, Poles are not able to definitively establish the positioning of their country in Europe, just as they are unable to define what Europe is and what exactly defines her territory. Their imagined map of Europe is not in keeping with purely scientific conclusions, but results instead from understandings and ideas of a metageographic nature which are riveted in their consciousness by ideological concerns, politicians, writers, news reporters and authors of school text books. It goes without saying, that the metageographic concepts, which go against the classical understandings concerning these questions have been, and are still being advanced. But at the same time it is important to note that they are also present in the language of geographical and geopolitical study. Such situation leads to conflict and mis-steps in the economic and political realms. An exact positioning of Poland and Europe, in agreement with principles advanced by scientific research, is absolutely essential for the proper understanding of the meaning and functioning of these two areas. This is because place names are not only the means to determine the very location of a place. They are attempts to characterize and even control the society's life and consciousness. The importance of naming in "shaping, contesting, and redrawing the imagined political geography of Europe" and the role

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the “geopolitics of naming” plays in discussing military strategies, national identity, political economy and diplomacy were convincingly demonstrated by Joshua Hagen (2003). It is important to remember the sentence by John H. Mackinder, ‘the influence of geographical conditions upon human activities has depended not merely on the realities as we know them to be and to have been, but in even greater degree on what men imagined in regard to them’ (after McDougall, op.cit., p. 225). This is why such subject matter should be the foundation for the elementary study of geography.

Where is Poland?

The analysis of the texts concerning the localization of Poland show a drastic variance of understanding. It appears that Poles, concerning the question at hand, can be divided into four groups. The first group believing that Poland is a country of Western Europe along with Germany, France and Great Britain, with whom Poland is most strongly tied, economically and politically as is expressed by Poland’s membership within international organizations. Secondly however, Poland was equally viewed to belong to Eastern Europe. This seems to be how populations of the countries to the west of Germany seem to view the question. For them Poles are distant, “eastern” partners. For example, it has often happened that overseas “celebrities”, poorly educated in the area of geography, have mistaken Poland for Russia,

equating Poles with Russians, thus solidifying the conviction of Poland belonging to the East.

Without determining which of these two varying options finds itself closest to the truth, we can accept the conclusion that those who see Poland as belonging to Western Europe, are basing their opinion upon Poland's common relationship with western ideals, while those who are inclined to place Poland with Eastern Europe accentuate, (aside from Poland's very localization), her ethnically Slavic and thus "eastern" identity. It is wise to abstain from advancing wide-sweeping theories concerning the geographical location of Poland, since one cannot be sure whether those creating the definitions, are in themselves geographical entities. No one has any doubt as to the existence of Europe and Poland, for their varying traits and even stereotypes are well known, despite the disagreement as to the question of their localization. As far as Eastern and Western Europe are concerned however, it would be very difficult to determine, which territories belong to which in order to form a unified whole. For example one may notice that the westernmost Portugal and Spain have very little in common with "western" Iceland, as Eastern Sweden and Finland have very little in common with Greece even though these countries find themselves on the same longitude. A stronger tie and similarity in landscape exists among the countries of the Mediterranean as also is the case in distant Scandinavia. Iceland is more similar in terrain and history with Sweden than the countries

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which are located on the western periphery of Europe. It is much the same with Greece, which reminds one more of Italy or Spain, than other countries found on the same nearby geographical longitude. It seems evident then, that it would be much easier to divide the countries of Europe into a Southern (or Mediterranean Region), and into a Northern (Nordic Region or Scandinavia), rather than attempting to adhere to the Eastern and Western division regions.

Although geography itself does not identify such regions as Eastern or Western Europe, the terms are very often used. It is necessary then to underscore, that these terms are not geographic in nature, but instead metageographic, resulting from historical events and ideology. In literature for example, the Western European countries are shown as the domain of Christianity (Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches) while the East is presented as being dominated by Orthodoxy as a buffer against the threat of Islam. When, in the last century however, religion ceased playing the main role as a determinate in civilization, Western Europe was defined as a domain of liberal democracy, separated from the totalitarianism of the East by “Iron Curtain” and Berlin Wall. From these examples, one can clearly see that the concepts of Eastern and Western Europe does not have its basis in geography, but instead possess a purely political and ideological connotation.

As was shown in the above mentioned research, apart from the main two options concerning the geographical localization of Poland,

there does exist a compromise opinion according to which Poland does not belong either to Western Europe nor to Eastern Europe; but instead to the Central expanses of the region. But here the question is raised: does a geographical entity under the name of Central Europe really exist? It goes without saying that simply listing the countries found within the central parts of Europe is not an answer to the question at hand, since every country and region possesses its “central” parts. Instead the question at hand is whether Central Europe exists as a place or geographical entity, possessing its own definition as a whole and having its own specific traits and character (*genius loci*). In the past such a concept was advanced by German geopoliticians. Their *Mitteleuropa* firstly denoted German-speaking countries and later increased its range as a concept to other countries, Poland being among them.² The viability of this concept was limited due to the very negative (for Germany), historical period of the two World Wars. The concept of *Mitteleuropa* then, did not gain wider acceptance since it was a concept which resulted from ideological project, and was not an expression of a geographical reality. *Mitteleuropa* in congruence with the idea of its creators, was to connote those areas directly under German control, or which had come under German control due to German, culturally, economically

² The evolution of the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, understood as a political doctrine was presented first by Eugeniusz Romer. He wrote, “the concept of Central Europe appeared in Germany and became the basis for German programs of expansion (...) I maintain that this concept (...) was a political doctrine” (Romer 1917, pp. 30-31).

and politically motivated expansionism. It should be emphasized that the concept of *Mitteleuropa* was not a utopian one, but was supported by the high economic and cultural position of Germany. Witnessing the great influence of German culture was the fact that no Slavic language was used nor French nor English during the deliberations of the Congress of Slavic Geographers and Ethnographers which took place in Kraków in 1927...only German. However, Central Europe as a geographical region simply does not exist in spite of various attempts to define the basic characteristics of the Central European identity. *Mitteleuropa* is not a geographical name and thus cannot be mapped (not unlike Western and Eastern Europe). There simply are no places so named.

In light of the above mentioned controversy and difficulties with definitions inherent in establishing the geographical localization of Poland, it must be mentioned that in the past few decades of the 20th century the concept of East Central Europe has appeared both in popular references and in formal scientific presentations as well. Such a concept owes its popularity to Oskar Halecki, a Polish historian working in the USA from the time of the Second World War (Lewicki 2012).

In the Introduction to the first edition of his study, Halecki defined the scope of his research as the eastern parts of Europe, consisting of those countries which had been (since the Middle Ages), tied culturally with the West, but having in later years lost their

independence. This area of Europe Halecki names East Central Europe. It is important to note that he did so however, "since there is no better name", as he so aptly put in his own words. It is clear that by this, Halecki was referring to countries which had developed in the context of Latin civilization and who had, after World War II, found themselves in the camp of Moscow's influence. Halecki then does not use for them the term Eastern Europe, simply because this name was being used by the growing Russian Imperium as a reference to what they considered to be the "European" part of the Soviet Union. Writing about the "wide isthmus between two seas", Halecki refers to the concept of the *Intermare* (pol. *Międzymorze* meaning "Between the Seas") of Eugeniusz Romer, which in a practical application stood as the foundation of the political policies of Józef Piłsudski (Halecki 1952, pp. 4-5, 13). Such policies intended to create a federation or political union between the countries of Poland, Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine, which would be able to counterbalance the power of Germany and Russia. But because of the existing conflicts between the nations of the *Intermare* territories, this project was doomed to failure. In the opinion of historians, the resistance of nations to the idea of a union was due, in large measure, to the politics of the Polish government, which denied autonomy to the administrative institutions of those regions inhabited by Ukrainians and Belorussians and Lithuanians, absorbing them instead into the Rada Ministrów (Cabinet of Ministers) in 1920. Halecki then ceased

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using the term *Intermare* instead favoring the newly coined name East Central Europe. In the end with Piłsudski's political project a fiasco and with the onset of the Second World War, the hope of Poland becoming a main power of the *Intermare* area failed. It was then that Halecki broadened the meaning of East Central Europe to include all those countries which found themselves within the realm of the influence of Moscow, without regard as to their cultural allegiances and formation. This term then, came to refer to those countries who find themselves between Finland, Germany and Italy from one side, and the USSR and Turkey on the other. Despite this, Halecki did not deem all 'comrades in misfortune' found within this 'satanic beltway' (*Teufel's Gürtel*), and who would find themselves isolated from the rest of the world by the "Iron Curtain", to be of the same category. Instead Halecki clearly differentiates those countries of Latin civilization from those of the Balkan states, who, in his opinion, bore the weight of the "Russian yoke" much more aptly than the former, 'People who were subjected to the oppressive Ottoman rule for 500 years learned to accept corruption, intolerance and despotism, and appeared to be quite willing to live under Communism to its end without a trace of resistance. These countries needed no occupying Soviet armies to keep them in line' (ibid. p.2). East Central Europe for Halecki then, was made up of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, that is to say countries formed by Latin civilization, and who had, in the last century experienced their own absorption into the confines of

the Eastern Imperium. The realities of belonging to the so called “Eastern Block” very readily put the brakes on the onward, cultural and economic development of these countries, leaving them culturally incapacitated, a situation from which they are striving to this day to free themselves. There did not however in the face of all this, develop a feeling of common and similar goals between the countries affected. Thus the concept of *Intermare* collapsed. Also there does not exist the region of East Central Europe. Like Oskar Halecki, one would be able to call a group of certain nations by a chosen term because of a certain historical commonality they may have shared at one point, but just as with the name East Central Europe, they only convey a historical-political idea, which does not permit us to recognize them as geographic regions. The strange vigor of such a concept flows from the idea of federalism, which fed the intellects of the most outstanding Poles not only in the interwar period (Józef Piłsudski), but also during the German Occupation (Władysław Sikorski) and later when ‘the ideal of federalism become the mandatory paradigm of thought of emigrees for the following decades’. Presently, with ongoing integration within the European Union, ones hears much about the “theory of the Central Zone” clearly taken from the ideas of Kazimierz Smogorzewski, and which represents a contemporary version of the Jagiellonian ideal and the *Intermare* concept (Rojek 2014). The well known version of the Jagiellonian ideal is the concept by Saul Cohen, who argued the necessity of a Gateway Region in eastern and central parts of Europe.

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Such region is to be composed of 'that middle tier of states between Germany and Russia' whose independence Mackinder felt to be crucial to Eurasian and world stability. Poland is understood as the core of this Gateway Region (Cohen 1991).

From the reflection given above, one may clearly conclude that Europe does not consist of such subregions as Eastern or Western, Central or East Central Europe. All of these terms are metageographic constructs, whose goals are ideological or political in nature. How then are we to define the geographical localization of Poland? The answer to this question is possible only after identifying Europe as an independent region. Towards this end it is imperative to first establish the criteria which serve the identification and delineation of regions themselves.

The classical and contemporary definition of Europe

As presented in the introduction of this paper, Europe is above all, a geographical name and because of this should not be mistaken with terms such as the European Union or with the "continent" often called by the same name. What then are the criteria which allows one to define Europe and her borders in a precise and yet understandable manner? One of the foundational criteria for the development of classical geography was the role and influence of civilization, although in contemporary geographical literature this view is rare and even controversial. Paul Vidal de la Blache, the founder of the French school

of regional geography was instrumental in expounding such an approach with the role of civilization at its foundation and his views were championed by his many followers. As a system of norms regulating interpersonal relationships and methods for organizing societal life, (especially in the areas of governance, economic matters, laws, ethics and education), civilization was formerly hailed as the main criterium in geography for the division of the world into regions and as the main motivator for the transformation of geographical landscape (Wilczyński 2011, pp. 126-146). Presently civilization as such, is only considered to be a concept proper to the disciplines of the historical and political sciences. Geographers having resigned then from the use of civilization as a criterium for geographical studies, have lost a valuable tool which functions in describing and researching the world regional structure.

In keeping with this criterium however of the role which civilization played in the development of classical geography, the name "Europe" connoted the area inhabited and developed by peoples co-creating Latin culture also known as Western culture. In congruence with the oldest available classical sources, Europe and Asia were understood as entities completely juxtaposed to one another. In this vein, Europe was understood to be thickly populated, possessing well-developed agriculture with a network of towns and many routes of communication. Asia on the other hand was understood to be comprised of deserted steppes and wooded tracts

separating civilized lands from the East and the North. According to the maps of the Pole Bernard Wapowski (circa 1526), the border of Europe and Asia was found in Poland and ran from north to south, just to the east of Wilno and Nowogródek, and along the line of the Słucz River toward Berdyczów and the middle part of Dniestr River valley. Interestingly, the name Berdyczów remains synonymous in Polish with a place totally removed from all main centers of civilization and which is difficult to reach. Even presently the saying goes that to send something to Berdyczów (pol. *'na Berdyczów'*), is to come to terms with the fact that the item sent will most surely be lost. To a certain degree, the movement of Polish settlements and the cultural influences which resulted from this process expanded the borders of Europe, fostering civilization. Thus the understanding of Europe was similar to the Greek understanding of *oikoumene*.

Such an understanding of Europe is however completely foreign to the authors of modern textbooks. Contemporary geography, having rejected differences in civilization as a determinant in identifying regions, has failed to propose any other workable and dependable criterium. In contemporary texts, the term Europe comprises an area stretching from Siberia and the Caspian Sea to the Atlantic and its tributaries. One look at the map allows one to conclude that it (Europe) is the most physiographically varied and westward fragment of Eurasia, having the shape of a dismembered peninsula, winding its way to the West and ending at the windswept cliffs of Cornwall's

Lands End and the Finisterre in Iberian Galicia. The observant reader of these texts will notice that the Eastern border of Europe does not run back to back with the Urals, but instead runs to the east of that line. In as much as the Ural Chain is presented as being “on the European side”, in the case of the Caucasus, it is exposed to be just the opposite. It is postulated that the border between Europe and Asia runs through the northern plains of these mountains and as such categorizes them as belonging to Asia. The Eastern, that is Siberian foot of the Urals and the Northern plains of the Caucasus are the only land borders of Europe postulated by contemporary authors. It is worth wondering as to how such conclusions were reached and on what basis they were advanced. Upon examining the distant Kubań steppes located between the Don River (the ancient Tanais) and the foothills of the Caucasus, it is impossible to notice any indicators which define them as a border area. The same people live on both sides of the border in question, maintaining the same way of life, cultural development, language and customs. On both sides there exists a unified nation. The same can be ascertained when traveling from the Ural chain to the east. Beyond the mountains we experience the ideal flatlands of the Siberian taiga, differing little from those existing on the western side of the mountains. Here one is met with postings which indicate ‘Europe’ to the West and ‘Asia’ to the East. Of course it is the Russians who post such signs. They are necessary for them, to uphold a consciousness of belonging to Europe. They simply

do not want to recognize the independence of European, (i.e. Latin) civilization and the factors which differentiate it from their own. At odds with some Polish publications, the Russian sources discussing the subject of the borders between Europe and Asia, differentiate between the concepts of continent (*материк* in Russian), which the term Eurasia denotes, and “parts of the world”, as the terms Europe and Asia denote. It is also important to note that in contradiction to Polish maps and atlases, in which the great plains stretching from the Arctic to the Caucasus and the Black Sea are named ‘Eastern European Lowlands’, some Russian sources maintain their traditional term for the same as the Ruthenian Plain (rus. Русская Равнина). The used word ‘Ruthenian’ is close to ‘Russkiy’ as explained by Schaffenburg (2007). As with the understanding of the term continent, it is important to underscore the most important and correct nature of the two elements making up the Russian name; for neither are these areas totally made up of lowlands, nor are they Eastern-European. With all surety these are plains which may most definitely be called Russian, even if within their confines other nationalities dwell.

Since contemporary geography has not formed clear criteria for the identification of regions, the location of the border between Europe and Asia is not noted as being the same in all textbooks on the subject. *The Great Encyclopedia PWN*, for example, states that the border separating Europe from Asia is a fluid line, and then the *Encyclopedia* proceeds to give several variants as to the possible

location of this border. Perhaps the strangest localization of the border between Europe and Asia, is that which places its line along the shore of the Caspian Sea. It is interesting then to note, that for a person standing on the shore of this sea, one would have to cross the 'border' of two geographical entities, which are named 'continents' in order to actually enter the water. With the analysis of contemporary geographical textbooks and other educational materials (not only in Poland), one is able to conclude, that the information contained within these materials often goes against the obvious and factual, for they treat Europe and Asia as 'discrete and objective geographical entities', divided by the ridge of the Urals, which are seen as their 'objective physical limit', or as the 'natural boundary of the European continent'. Some authors emphasize it with a hint of irony (Malatesta & Squarcina 2011), while William Anthony Hay ignores the modern thinking and instead of Ural-Caucasus he introduces the 'Dvina-Dnieper portage' (Hay 2003). The understanding of Europe and Asia as distinct and equal entities separated by the border of the Urals is then only one among many concepts functioning within contemporary geography, which defy empirical thinking. But despite this, it reigns supreme in the general understanding of geographical matters, affecting the status of geography and its position within the wider system of knowledge.

In order not to enter deeper into the above mentioned '*magnum delirium*', it is necessary to return to the importance of

classical concepts on the subject matter at hand. The problem with this however is, that the understanding of Europe as a region belonging to Latin civilization, does not enjoy the respect of contemporary geographers and functions less and less within the wider consciousness. Remnants of the classical school of geographical research resound within the statements of individuals such as Josip Brodski, who concluded that Eastern Europe does not exist, since such territories belong to Western Asia. From this statement alone, it is evident that Brodski studied classical geography which held that Asia extends to the Polish outposts of the East (known as the '*kresy*' or '*ukraina*'), since in this area Asiatic cultures or 'asianism' co-existed with Latin culture. In Poland it was called Sarmatism which was signified in the Saxon Dynasty period by the shaven heads of the nobility and by their wearing of an outer garment called a '*kontusz*' (Koneczny 2011, p. 10). This is an aspect worth underscoring since Sarmatism in Poland is not at all linked with Asia. The conviction that civilization functions as determinant affecting the identification of regions, has become almost entirely removed from the geographical literature, and the very term civilization was excluded from geographical terminology. This situation has shown to be very useful for Russian attempts to identify with "Europeanness". As Iver Neumann put it, 'The Russian state formulated, disseminated, and insisted upon a geographical definition of Europe as stretching all the way to the Ural mountains in the East [...], repeated protestations

that Russia was an European power suggest that this was far from obvious' (Neumann 2003, pp. 12-13).

Because of the expanse of the Russian territories, it was impossible to unite them all with Europe. Due to this, it was deemed necessary by the Russians to prove a division of the country into a western part (which included Moscow) and its Asiatic remains. According to this logic the western part was referred to as European. From the time of Peter the Great, Russia looked at Europe with a certain complex of inferiority and jealousy. Neumann understood the matter thus, 'Russians saw the question of relations with the Poles less in terms of their Roman Christianity and more in terms of their economic and political organization. Not infrequently, written statements were made to the effect that the Poles were superior to Russians in this regard. These embryonic Westernizers surmised, therefore, that backward Russia had something to learn from the Poles and other Europeans' (ibid. p. 10). As an indication of the existence of such a complex, geography was in Russia reconstituted as a natural science, since such sciences could support the argument which divided Russia into two parts, one of which was the 'European Russia'. But because all economic and cultural statistics registered to that time, recognized unilaterally that Russia and Europe are two differing worlds, it became necessary for them to look for criteria which would transcend cultural indicators in order to support the idea of the Russian-European unity. In order then, to show the

'Europeanness' of western part of Russia, it was necessary to separate its 'Asiatic' part from its 'European' part with a border that would be acceptable to international opinion. Russian sources were successful in this endeavor as they continue to be in our present time. Russian children today along with the most of the youth across the world all learn that it is the Ural Mountain chain which divides Europe and Asia, and thus 'European' Russia from 'Asiatic' Siberia.

How was the division of Europe and Asia arrived at?

Before one can present which criteria were used by the Russians in order to establish their understanding of the localization of the border between Europe and Asia, it is necessary to present the socio-cultural backdrop which existed behind the scenes in the entire process. As it has been already stated, the establishment of the borders in question among the Russians, originated in the time of Peter the Great and were the result of decisions clearly supported by representatives of the Russian elite. Wearing a French wig and garb, it was Vassili Tatischeff who in 1730 was the first to express his support of the official transfer of the eastern border of Europe to the foot of the Urals and Caucasus (which had as its goal the further Russification of the Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples of the Volga basin area). For the supporters of Peter the Great's program of westernization, such terms as 'Asia' or 'asianism' (rus. *Азиатчина*) carried with them a pejorative connotation, denoting Siberia as a barbaric land, which could be

explored, exploited and eventually colonized. Aspirations toward Europeanization, which grew among Russians thanks to, in part, contacts with Poland, were not only supported by those of the aristocracy. They were also embraced by such people as Leyba Davidovich Bronstein (known more often by his assumed name Lev Trotski), who favored the idea of a complete break with turanism (= asianism) and with 'the icons, Holy Ruthenia and with the history of the 17th Century'. This meant in practice the wish to assimilate all Russia into a 'new and pure, Western civilization' (Rosemont 1988).

The aspirations of the Russians to Europeanize did not meet with universal acceptance. During the Enlightenment and during the Napoleonic Period, Russia was denied entry into the family of European nations precisely because of her differing customs. Hugo Kołłątaj underscored the continuance in Russia of (as he put it), 'slavery and ignorance', identifying a lack of personal freedom, justice and equality under a cogent rule of law. The convictions of Joachim Lelewel concerning this same subject are very concrete. Lelewel saw the Romanovs Russia as a degenerate child re-born of the Old Ruthenia, built upon an ethnically Slavic foundation, which was constructed from elements of the Byzantine and Turanic civilizations, which in turn had lost all ancient, democratic and social relationships including that of language. Russia's accentuation of her Slavic identity, it was postulated by Lelewel, was to serve the goal of her own expansionism and 'the swallowing up of peoples' which would result

from such expansionism. These are the very traits of Russia, which still continue to function even after the collapse of the czarist monarchy and which are still evident as part of the Russian milieu following the demise of the U.S.S.R.

But the pro-European politics of Peter the Great also had influential opponents within Russia itself. Among them were the Russian Pan-Slavists (Slavophiles), who held that although Russia and all other Slavic lands did not belong to Asia, she also stood as an antithesis to Europe (Walicki 1989, 502). In order to express this concept, the Pan-Slavists used the term 'Eurasia', which they borrowed from the 19th century Austrian geologist Edward Suess. Ignoring the dominant, cultural identification by some Slavic nations with the West, they concluded that all Slavs possess a "non-western" soul and therefore, together they should resist the expansion of the civilization of the West. These views of the Russian Pan-Slavists were in keeping with the many, well known views existing in Europe itself, which held that the 'West' was the sole domain of the German and Romance or Latin nations. The first to express this postulation was the German historian Leopold von Ranke. Later, following the Second World War, Theodore von Laue limited the idea of 'the West' identifying it as being constituted only by France and Britain. This view was tied with his specific convictions emanating from German National Socialism. In point of fact, von Laue considered the development of Nazism to be a direct result of an 'attack' by Eastern

ideology upon Germany, which in turn had as its goal the extermination of all traces of Latin civilization within Germany (von Laue 1987). Evident from these approaches was the fact that European thinkers considered borders between regions to be determined by the reaches of a given civilization itself, which in turn is influenced by the geographical realities of the terrain. This approach of the Europeans did not please Russian geographers who sought out “proofs” that would establish geographical unity between Europe and Russia, or at least a part of her.

Aside from the various controversies which arose in Russia and Europe, Russians have never recognized their distinct separation from Europe, a separation which they have always understood as relegating them to a lower cultural status.³ It is because of this complex of inferiority that they have always desired to link their vast country with Europe as a whole. This could not be accomplished of geography alone and its existing parameters. One must note that the vast Russian plains are something completely different from the many, rather small, countries of Europe which are separated from one another by mountain ranges, great forests or ocean inlets. A continental climate also separates the Russian lands from the oceanism of Europe. But most of all, Russia has always, in a decided fashion, differed from

³ The question whether Russia is a part of the West (or Europe) was more recently discussed by Vladislav Martin Zubok (2005), Father Karl C. Schaffenburg (2007), Nikolas K. Gvosdev (2007), and John O’Loughlin and Paul Talbot (2005).

Europe economically and culturally, since her experience of history is much different from that of Europe. The Middle Ages were experienced in a different way in Russia, the country never knew the full effects of the Renaissance or Baroque Periods, her faith was different and a different alphabet was in use. The life style and mentality of Russia was simply different than that of Europe. Particularly different was the Russian style of government, the way she conducted societal relationships, her mentality as well as the hierarchy of values predominating within her, as many Russian authors themselves have noted.

What are the criteria then, by which at least a part of Russia could be called 'European'? This question can be examined with the aid of physical geography, which in Russia is known as the premier geographical discipline. According to research in this area, it is evident that during Eocene, some 50 millions of years ago (not so long ago in geological terms), the vast expanses of the plains of western Siberia and the Turkistan served as the bed of a shallow sea. Smaller bodies of water linked this sea with the Black Sea. The Mediterranean Sea was linked in this fashion with the Arctic Ocean, which led to the separation of a large fragment of the Eurasian land mass, constituting today's Europe, along with western Russia and the Urals. These seas were shallow and short lived, but Russian geographers used their existence as a pretext in order to separate western Russia from the rest of her territories, referring to it as 'European'. This above

mentioned, short and substantially unimportant geological episode in the history of Eurasia became the pretext for the identification of the territory belonging to the “continent” now known as Europe. Despite the questionable criteria used and the importance of such a division, it is one that is respected by the redactors of public statistics, the authors of maps and atlases as well as textbooks. According to many authors, the definition of Europe as stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals is recognized as the “classical” concept. Nothing strange then, that Europe is mistakenly known in the media and within textbooks as a ‘continent’, and the term ‘Eastern Europe’, is not used to define Poland, but instead western part of Russia. Consequently Poland, a border country of Latin civilization lying on the eastern borders in close proximity to Russia, is placed in ‘Central’ or ‘East Central Europe’. In publications of the regional geography of Europe then, it is much easier to find mention of Kazan Khanate or the Volga Bulgars than references concerning the regional structure of England, Portugal or Belgium, not to mention those of the Kashub region or the Austrian Vorarlberg. Such ambiguity is the price for the possibility that the Russians may be named Europeans.

Although the West took the Russian hypothesis into consideration, it would be difficult to imagine that the Russians alone could succeed in dictating to the entire world how geography was to be taught. The concept of Europe in the Russian view, would not have had a chance for acceptance without the appearance of a great ‘ally in

the cause' upon the scene. As Eugeniusz Romer noted, the recognition of Poland as a Central European nation is primarily due to the influence of German geographers, who for geopolitical reasons, desired to expand to the East the territories which they termed *Mitteleuropa*. Alfred Kirchhoff taught in 1890 that *Mitteleuropa* is the main expanse which naturally belongs to the German Empire along with Switzerland, the western part of Austria but without Polish Galicia to which they also laid claim. In 1907 Alfred Hettner partitioned the Congress District of Warsaw into the confines of *Mitteleuropa*. Ewald Banse five years later added all of historical Poland, beyond the Dniepr and Dvina Rivers to the same definition (Romer 1926). The incorporation of Poland to *Mitteleuropa* is the same as recognizing western Russia as an Eastern European country.

Although the vast majority of geographical and cartographic publications confirm that the border between Europe and Asia runs through Russian territories, the thesis concerning the 'europanness' of western Russia, supported solely on the basis of physical-geographical and especially palaeogeographical criteria, is not convincing. For what meaning can the fact that 50 million years ago the areas of western Russia comprised one land mass with Europe, (and that such areas were separated from China, Tibet, Mongolia and Turkistan by seas), really have for contemporary life? We do not live in the Eocene age, so we must acknowledge the fact that there exists one Russian land and one Russian nation. Her division into 'Europeans'

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and 'Asians' is as absurd as to divide Poles into groups because of whether they live on the north or south side of the Warsaw-Berlin post-glacial valley. The Russians, like the Poles, aside from local differences are one homogeneous nation. They have their own culture, their own societal organization and life style which are mirrored in the landscape. What sense is there then of dividing these territories into 'European' or 'Asian' sectors since they are all Russian? Such a division of Russia into European and Asian parts is purely palaeogeographical and not geographical in nature. It could be meaningful only for the ancestors of mastodons or dryopithecus (if such creatures really existed), but not for those living today and especially not for those who possess the competency of rational thinking.

Eurasia: a concept of unity between Europe and Russia

The Russians, inspired by the idea of differentiating western Russia from Siberia, did not cease in their efforts to propagate a certain unity between "Europeanness" and Russia. In case it did not enjoy favor, they proposed other solutions, which were characterized by, not only parts of Russia belonging to Europe, but *all* of Russia belonging to Europe. The result of such a union was purported by them to be "Eurasia", that is a "Europe which stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific". It was to denote that Russia is regarded as European but non-Western (Trenin 2002; see also Gvosdev 2007). The

purveyors of eurasianism (among them the most influential Russian thinker Alexander Dugin) admitted that there indeed exist 'differences in the ways of governing the society, in the mentality and hierarchy of values', between Russians and Europeans, which 'have expressed themselves by taking different directions as far as economic and societal development, and with the evolution of administrative and political institutions as well.' The source of these differences is according to them, simply a matter of Europe and Russia's respective cultural inheritances: Europe being the inheritor of Roman civilization and Russia the inheritor of Byzantine culture and 'short-lived, despotic states of Asiatic nomads.' Vladimir Abramov, pointing out the barrier in mentality and culture between Europe and Russia, correctly notes the inconsistency of the European Union in accepting countries for membership who lay outside of the influences of Western civilization. While underscoring the European character of the works of Russian writers and artists, his whole approach is built upon a mistaken concept of a metageographical nature, according to which he accepts as a given the notion that the ethos of the Russian nation was always existent in the eastern regions of the 'European Continent' (Abramov 2013). Such a conclusion would only make sense if the borders of the Urals could be understood in a cultural and geographical sense and not only in the metageographical sense. A similar line of thinking is found with Valentin Mikhailov who mistakenly juxtaposes Europe as a geographical entity, with Europe as a cultural entity. Such a

comparison could only be proven if we considered geography to be a natural science, having nothing to do with civilization. It would demand that we discard the whole tradition of classical geography, relegating it to the understanding which dominated the scene during the communist period.

The arguments of the adherents of 'euroasianism' often seem on the surface to be cogent and logical. And indeed they would be completely convincing if they did not result from a false metageographical concept of Europe as a 'continent' ending at the Urals and if they did not ignore geography as a social science, which has as its central subject of study civilization. It seems that Russians lack the bravery to be a separate civilization, as many of the statements of their adherents having to do with the concept of 'European' Russia, are formed by metageographic influences and the ever pervasive complex of cultural inferiority. 'Despite the fact that for a few centuries the eastern border of Europe has been understood to be at the Urals, on the mental map of Europe Russia remains an independent civilization, which is described with high-pitched and damning epitaphs' (Mikhailov 2013). Unjust is also the conviction, that Russia received its spirituality from Byzantium and its 'army-camp' style system of governance from Scandinavia, which had as its goal the minimalization of Turanism upon Russian societal realities. Perhaps then Russia really does not denote a civilization. If so there would be nothing left for them to do but to identify with Western civilization

with the risk of losing the original traits of their own culture. Geographical realities which decide the independent nature of civilizations, along with the immensity of territory and its status as a great power, allow one however to recognize Russia as an independent civilization, which should base its relationship with Europe and Asiatic civilizations on standards of true partnership and equality. The already mentioned bitter epitaphs and negative tone concerning Russia would subside if Russia could see herself as being proud of her own civilization and not as an entity seeking to constantly imitate the civilization of the West. It is worth noting that such a strategy only points to Russia's endless lack of development. In order to truly 'catch up' with the West it would be necessary for her to employ a different approach. In the case of Russian identity, perhaps she would do well (apart from her natural characteristics), to employ elements of Russian spirituality in such a process.

The eastern bulwark of Europe

The conclusion that the division of Russia into European and Asian sectors is as devoid of rational foundation as is the conclusion that the border between Europe and Asia exists at the Urals. These concepts are pure conjecture, false creations and metageographical in character. In this milieu, it seems only proper to return to the importance of the classical concepts according to which Europe is

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understood as a region inhabited by nationalities which co-create together a Western civilization, and of which Poland is its most eastern representative.

In Poland the classical understanding of Europe, according to which “européanness” was always equated with close ties to Latin culture, still functioned before the Second World War. Jerzy Smoleński, a geographer from Kraków, postulated that the eastern border of Europe was located at the eastern outreaches of Poland (the Varangian Zone, i.e. the line of Dvina and Dniepr Rivers which linked the Black Sea with the Gulf of Finland); and according to Smoleński, that was as far as Western civilization reached (Smoleński 2012). But such influences of the Polish nation became more and more limited through time and Poland ultimately lost her position as the main power in the *Intermare* region. At the same time, the eastern border of Europe, shifted to the west. Following the Second World War, these borders extended beyond the Elbe, and after the corrections of 1989-91 were positioned at the Bug River. In present times, Poland and her neighbors, freed from the yoke of communism, are attempting to make up ground and to erase the stamp of cultural backwardness which they had inherited from this totalitarian period. The political and social situations of Belarus and the Ukraine seem to indicate that their return to Western civilization will be very difficult. So then it is Poland which continues to be the easternmost country of Europe (along with Lithuania and the remaining Baltic countries), and which

remains as a bulwark of Western civilization. We then should underscore the position of Poland, and her international role. Regardless by what name we call Poland's Eastern neighbors (Russia, Eurasia, Western Asia, 'Great Siberia'), they are her most immediate neighbors. It has been Poland through the centuries who has been the brunt of direct strikes by peoples representing foreign civilizations dwelling to the East (Alans, Mongols, Tatars and Turks), and it was Poland who was responsible for upholding control in the Eastern Territories (called in Polish *Ukraina*), where Cossacks often fermented revolts, after which they would decide to make agreement with Moscow. It was Poland who held back the 1920 Bolshevik invasion, which had as its goal the domination of all of Europe with the 'new faith'. Poland then, as an European nation, possesses the greatest experience in dealing with the reality of the East, and should cultivate relations with the East, which are not characterized by military rivalry but instead by economic and cultural co-operation.

The role which Poland's geographical location has given her, has been more or less accepted by her. *The Treatise of Two Sarmatias* by Matthias of Miechów is an expression of Poland's greatest cultural aspirations as a country. This great man who exposed the ancient views of Ptolemy as they relate to the territories which lay to the east of Poland, identified them as expanses which the Kingdom of Poland should explore, study and win for herself...for the good of and for the increase of Christian civilization. The power of the then existing

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Kingdom of Poland and especially the power of Polish culture, allowed Matthias to place Poland in the company of nations realizing great achievements within this epic of the great geographical discoveries. In the dedication to his great work he wrote the following ambitious and proud words:

‘As the countries of the south and peoples neighboring the Ocean all the way to India were discovered by the King of Portugal, may the countries of the North, in the Northern Ocean regions and those dwelling to the East be opened to the world, explored by the knights and wars of the King of Poland’ (Wilczyński 2012, pp. 19-20).

In the centuries to follow similar documents witnessing to such international ambitions and power of Polish culture are totally absent. Later came the period of the partitions of Poland. But even in the face of this, the one who would presuppose that the partitions would mean the total collapse of the Polish nation, would be in error. It was Feliks Koneczny who wrote on this topic most convincingly, demonstrating how Polish culture broadened the reach of Latin civilization, even in periods of great political upheaval: ‘within the nation, (Poland), so fettered by the poor and the persecuted, a great spirit of assimilation opened up. This came about despite all odds, proving that the spirit is more powerful than the material (Koneczny 1997).

Such facts should have for us, in our present day a powerful meaning. Europe has become a great cultural melting-pot, even one

greater than Koneczny was describing. Latin culture finds itself threatened, though not by turanism or communism. The Spenglerian expression *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* has today a different meaning. The West itself is discarding those values thanks to which, throughout the centuries it formed the greatest civilization in the history of the world. The conditions governing liberal-democratic nations are severely limiting the three pillars of our civilization, those being: Christianity, the Greek philosophy, and Roman law (the Enlightenment liberalism and progressivism being a modern addition). Governmental systems are eroding the sacred character of private ownership in the name of “freedom” and “emancipation” of the individual and groups, blocking the economic liberty of the majority. Political correctness is in a painful way crippling the exercise of Truth, while true justice is being substituted with wayward concepts of “social justice”. But without aforementioned building blocks, true ethics cannot exist, ethics which stand as the foundation of all Western Civilization.⁴

All these negative changes affect Poland to a large degree as they influence the thinking of an ever increasing percentage of her society, awakening however, those who remain steadfast to conservative convictions. Perhaps such representatives exist in greater

⁴ How Protestant Christianity was ‘distilled’ into a secular ethical system was presented by James Kurth (2001), and the dangers resulting from rejection of classical culture and Christian religion were explained by Alan Charles Kors (2001).

numbers in Poland than in other countries, since from the Polish perspective one can see clearly the decadence of the West and also the fact that countries outside the influence of Latin civilization are more immune to the disease which is causing such decadence. In this regard the book of Ryszard Legutko should serve as a signal to Poles, that the idolic relationship which they have often expressed in the past toward liberal democracy, is coming to an end. Legutko points to the de-culturalization of these countries of the West, along with the complete collapse of the ideals of their educational systems, which has had a direct result on the weakening of their political systems, especially in the area of democratic institutions (Legutko 2012). The true appreciation of these facts serves as a necessary condition for Poland to undertake once again those tasks which result from her geographical location. As Feliks Koneczny noticed, 'the geographical location of Poland has to itself the great advantage, that it is central and thus can move to the political center, with the ability to thrust itself directly into the center of civilization'(Koneczny 1997, p. 421). Even if Latin civilization collapses entirely, there will remain remnants which can witness to the past excellence of this once great culture and as an inspiration for the rise of a new civilization for the next generations to come. From the point of view of Latin civilization, this chain of events might be acceptable, as one takes into consideration the amnesia of the West, which ever more frequently dismisses Christianity, liberalizes the rule of law, and less frequently reminds

itself of its Roman roots, corrupting knowledge, philosophy and art, and distancing these disciplines from their Greek ideals of beauty and truth.

The goal then of contemporary science and study, especially geography and geopolitics, is the development and dissemination of the type of scientific ideas thanks to which the national and societal consciousness of peoples may be strengthened. Such a consciousness would be able to lead to the reversal of some negative process of deculturalization and to survival of elements proceeding from the roots of Latin civilization. They then could be disseminated around all of Europe, confirming the prophetic character of St. Faustina Kowalska's vision. Such a consciousness could lead to Poland, because of its location, fulfilling her role within civilization. Is it possible then, that from Poland the spark may be ignited which will once again light the flame of Western Civilization anew? Much would depend on geography, which would need to cleanse itself from the influences of widely accepted metageographical constructs, whose continued, uncritical use stands as in insult to that which is rational and a negation of empirical argumentation. As Alan Charles Kors put it, 'in the current academic climate of indoctrination, tendentiousness, and fantasy, the independence of critical intellect and the willingness to learn open-mindedly from experience of a reality independent of the human will, are the greatest hopes of our civilization' (Kors 2001, p. 357).

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