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The Idea of "Eastern Europe": Cultural Synthesis at the Frontier with the Enemy Beyond Europe

Abstract:

The paper examines Eastern Europe's complex and often problematic identity, particularly its positioning between East and West through the philosophical, historical, cultural, and geopolitical debates and their implications of this region's identity. The paper discusses the role of cultural synthesis in shaping national identity, specifically focusing on the work of Lithuanian philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis. Šalkauskis' idea of Lithuania being a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations through cultural synthesis is central to the analysis. Cultural synthesis is interpreted as a fundamental creative openness to influence and a way to integrate national and European identity. The paper also addresses the ongoing debate about Russia's identity as being "beyond Europe," both ideologically and politically, particularly in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This is done by engaging an ironic essay by Russian poet Josif Brodsky, and an interpretation of Russia's war against Ukraine by historian Alexander Etkind. Through these the paper reflects on the current geopolitical context pointing to the persistent ideological and political divide, particularly regarding Russia's stance toward the idea of Europe.

Keywords:

Stasys Šalkauskis, Cultural Synthesis, Josif Brodsky, Alexander Etkind.

Introduction

In everyday life – calling a Pole or a Lithuanian "Eastern European" today, more often than not, might be perceived as an insult, just like calling Poland an ex-socialist country or Lithuania an ex-communist. But this is an insult from which not only some Westerners but also Russian imperialists have never shied away. Lithuania likes to fashion itself now as a part of Northern Europe or at least call itself Baltic. There, of course, is also the discourse on Central Europe, even though *Mitteleuropa* also has bad connotations (Friedrich Naumann's work is one example of why many are not happy with such a term).[1]

Is the question on the concept of "Eastern Europe" philosophical? It could be, although historians would beg to differ – for them, it is a question of political history and the history of concepts. Others may think this is a question of geographical or political nomenclature: here we are in limbo between academic nominalism and the almost mystical belief in the power of words and names. There is, of course, the question of relations. "Eastern" to what and "Europe" to whom? Who gives the name? Is this again a Western by-product of the binary opposition of Orient and Oxidant? A left-over division of the Cold War era? Or something people would like to see themselves? Intuition suggests that subjectivity, agency, and reflexivity are far more important than quasi-objective labeling.

But no doubt the question about Central and Eastern Europe is least of all about geography. It may be about history, culture, and philosophy.[2] And it is most definitely about politics. Saying that we are talking about a political question (a question that can be formulated in the very basic distinction of friend and enemy), we must also not be tempted to use history or philosophical conceptions as a means of political justification. But equally important are factors of cultural, civilizational, and political imagination: the choice for confrontation rather than cooperation or at least co-existence is not determined by geography but by perceptions of security, interests, and identities. The assessment of risk and danger in politics is based on political imagination.

So, I would like to discuss the concept of Eastern Europe and European borders from several perspectives. These questions will be explored through the lens of three

1) A concise history of Naumann's concept is presented here: Eisfeld, "Mitteleuropa."

2) A fundamental reflection in the region is well underway, see Bursztyka, "Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe."

cultural artifacts. The first one – a book on East-West cultural synthesis written in Russian by a young Lithuanian philosopher by the name of Stasys Šalkauskis, translated into French and published in Switzerland right after World War One. The second is a short and ironic piece written in an American magazine by the Russian Nobel prize-winning poet Josif Brodsky, who debated the Czech writer in exile, Milan Kundera, published in 1985. The third – is an interpretation of the Russian war against Ukraine and the West, presented by the Russian historian Alexander Etkind.

There is, of course, the immediate problem of differences – how can we compare a book by a philosopher to an article written by a poet, to a political pamphlet by a historian (all from different periods)? One piece was written by a man who very consciously chose to be a part of a small nation-state project, the other – by a man with imperial nostalgia and grand literary ambition, and the third by a contemporary public intellectual and historian, who is also Russian. Even when dealing with great events or phenomena, historians usually lack extraordinary evidence. Instead, as detectives, they try to piece together small pieces of information into a larger narrative. So will this paper aim for broader problems through the path of metonymy.

I want to make two points: my more general proposition is – to change the label Eastern Europe to Easternmost Europe. We are at a frontier – culturally and politically. However, being at a frontier does not mean only the establishment of walls or borders, but also requires cultural openness and flexibility – frontiers are places of risk and opportunity. That opportunity is, first and foremost, cultural: the concept of cultural synthesis can help us understand the complex relationship in our region with national identities and a fluid openness to outside influences or to the idea of simultaneously belonging to a common European cultural and political project. Secondly, I hold that even though Europe does not have a fixed geographical structure or limit (rather, following Jan Patočka, we should talk about Europe as an idea based on care for the soul and living in truth)[3] – Russia is beyond Europe precisely because, time

3) Patočka certainly reflects on the historical-political aspect of European identity: "European history or the birth of Europe as a political reality took place in two waves. These waves are characterized by a sort of creative destroying. How is this to be understood? I will say it in definite terms right now: Europe came into existence upon the wreckage, first of the Greek polis, and then of the Roman Empire. And like the Greek polis, so the Roman Empire became extinct, because within them took place a development that alienated their own inhabitants, their own public, from the life form in which they lived" (Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 10–11).

and time again, it chooses to be not only outside of it but against it not only politically but also ideologically.

There is also the political matter – more than ten years ago, the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity at Maidan Square in Kyiv started because of Ukraine's aspirations to join Europe politically and economically in the European Union. This and Russia's war against Ukraine would bring into question many historical and political notions of what it means to be a part of Europe. With new global challenges, possibly a post-global paradigm of geopolitical imagination emerging, there is a fundamental need for rethinking on how European and national identities in Europe function.

Stasys Šalkauskis and the Idea of Cultural Synthesis

Stasys Šalkauskis (1886–1941) was one of the first thinkers in modern Lithuania to try to offer a philosophically based cultural and geopolitical vision of Lithuania as a state located "between East and West" and connecting the origins of the "two worlds" through cultural synthesis. The method of synthesis, or its specific content, on the one hand, reflected Šalkauskis' personal experience of national revival; on the other hand, it remained, to a large extent, a pure philosophical abstraction. The idea of cultural synthesis, being between "East and West," is certainly not an original one in what is called Eastern and Central Europe. Still, all these concepts have something to offer in terms of reflection.

Šalkauskis was not only one of the leading Catholic intellectuals of the interwar period, but also one of the more original Lithuanian thinkers of his time. Although in general philosophical matters he did not seem to have departed from the neo-Thomist doctrines that he had learned while studying in Fribourg, Switzerland, in the philosophy of culture, he attempted to create original concepts or, as we would say now, he made the philosophy of culture the dominant paradigm in inter-war Lithuania.[4]

But there is a big problem. As today's front lines show, we are beyond the East-West synthesis or bridge between the so-called "East-West" discourse (even if

4) The main themes of Šalkauskis' philosophy are discussed here: Sverdiolas, "Stasys Salkauskis"; and Knasas, "Šalkauskis' Philosophy of Culture."

physical cargoes are making their way to Russia as successfully as possible). Politically and culturally, we in the so-called "Eastern Europe" are an outpost of the West.

In an extramural argument between Šalkauskas and Felix Koneczny, a professor of Stefan Batory University in inter-war Vilnius, the latter seems to have won the argument,[5] arguing that there is no possibility of a cultural synthesis between East and West and that we have to choose who we are with – the Latin Western civilization or with what comes from Russia. Finally, the very existence between East and West is neither originally Šalkauskian nor originally Lithuanian – Šalkauskis takes the idea of East-West synthesis from Vladimir Solovyov, and we can easily find variations on this theme in the intellectual history of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and probably many other countries.[6] But perhaps there is a valuable grain in Šalkauskis' discussion of the synthesis of cultures that goes beyond the "East-West" question. This paper proposes to look at his idea of cultural synthesis as an idea of national identity in a post-global world.

It is impossible to cover the entire intellectual development of Šalkauskis in a few sentences, so let us limit ourselves to noting that the ideas of national culture and cultural synthesis appear in his reflections in one way or another throughout his life. Written during the First World War and published in 1919, he also wrote a book on the theme of "cultural synthesis." In 1919, his work *On the Border of Two Worlds* was published in Geneva. *A Synthetic Essay on the Problem of Lithuanian National Civilization*[7] presented the first version of cultural synthesis. Still, later, he returned to this idea several times. In this work, Šalkauskis presents Lithuania's cultural and political problem through the prism of the historical challenges to its agency: "Now we know what the borrowing of the past from Russian and Polish cultures cost Lithuania… Every intelligent and enlightened Lithuanian who grew up under the influence of Russian and Polish cultures must try to get rid of alien forms without rejecting what is universal and positive in these cultures. In other words, Lithuanians must combine the various elements of Russian and Polish cultures into

5) The indirect dispute and its peripeteia have been somewhat analyzed here: Vasilevskis, "Filozofia na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego."

6) For example, Shchyttsova, "'The Attitude of Modernity.'"

7) Šalkauskis, *Sur les Confins de deux Mondes*.

one organic whole."[8] According to him, Lithuania will either be able to create an independent culture, or it will not happen politically because of external influences and the political pretensions enabled by those influences (an insight still relevant when we remember Russia's manipulation of culture by drawing the boundaries of the "Russian world").

In Šalkauskis' conception, the East was Russia, the West was Europe, and in the case of Lithuania, it was first and foremost Poland and Germany. He perceived the dominance of both Russian and Polish cultures (formed during periods of occupation or close coexistence) as a threat, but he did not see Lithuanian culture as something that necessarily had to reject other cultures and their influence but rather as a dynamic creation that was open and able to assimilate dynamic elements coming from outside. Šalkauskis sees the question of nationhood as a certain combination of universal and particular elements: national culture gives a unique form to universal contents for the whole of humanity. Because of this orientation toward universality, Šalkauskis also rejected chauvinistic ideas of national exceptionalism or messianism.

There is also some personal experience here: he grew up in the family of a Polish-speaking doctor, studied at Moscow University (but due to poor health, he spent most of his time in Samarkand), and in 1915, he went to study in Switzerland. At the same time, Šalkauskis was concerned with finding a balance between the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, who had influenced him greatly in his youth, and the neo-Thomist philosophy he later discovered. He first wrote his work on the synthesis of culture in Russian and then had it translated into French (from which it was later translated into Lithuanian). For many educated people in Šalkauskis' generation, belonging to Lithuania as a national project was a conscious decision. Thus, it was from this interesting cocktail of history, languages, ethnicities, and experiences that the modern vision of a new national identity was born.

Roger Scruton has well articulated one of the fundamental differences between two conceptions of culture – Johann Gottfried Herder's conception of culture as a "common culture" linking all members of a given group and Wilhelm von Humboldt's conception of culture as something to be attained through cultiva-

8) Šalkauskis, "Dviejų pasaulių takoskyroje," 163 [translated by the author].

tion (or "high culture").[9] Although Šalkauskis does not discuss this issue explicitly, he sees both elements and combines them into a single concept of culture (it is also interesting to note that he uses the terms culture and civilization essentially synonymously). Culture, for him, is both what unites a nation in its unique forms and the potential to be fulfilled in becoming a true nation (i.e., having reached a higher level of cultural development). At the same time, universally significant cultural achievements do not lose their individual context and their connection to a specific cultural soil:

> It is clear, then, why the great geniuses of humanity combine the richness of the human spirit with the fullness of national expression. These were, for example, the prophets of Israel, Buddha in the Indies, Plato to the Greeks, Caesar and Tacitus to the Romans, Dante to the Italians, Shakespeare in England, Goethe and Kant in Germany, Pascal and Bossuet in France, Dostoyevsky in the Russias, Ibsen to the Norwegians, and many more not mentioned here. Each of them has concentrated in the depths of his own nature the primordial elements of the individual, the national, and the human spirit in general.[10]

For Šalkauskis, nation-building was unthinkable without the creation of a universally relevant modern culture (hence the philosopher's strong emphasis on pedagogy as a discipline that seeks to bring about human beings). As Gintautas Mažeikis puts it, "Šalkauskis observes that the most important factor determining the development of the world's peoples is not a language (the Swiss do not have a single language), not a territory (the Jews did not have their own territory for a long time), nor a religion, but the active and productive interaction of the common folk and the educated class, which ensures the complete development of the individual."[11] This is why Šalkauskis sees culture as that which binds individuals together into a collective unity.

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9) Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 8–14.

10) Šalkauskis, "Dviejų pasaulių takoskyroje," 204 [translated by the author].

11) Mažeikis, "Globalizacija ir Lietuvos tautinės civilizacijos idėja," [translated by the author].

Šalkauskis saw the issue of national culture not as a matter of unreflective defensive preservation and conservation but as a matter of future-oriented creativity and pedagogical education. He perceived national culture as a political project which should call for a conscious commitment to it. For Lithuania, Šalkauskis saw the chance to discover its uniqueness in the synthesis of different civilizations – through the enrichment that occurs when differences meet. In other words, nationality must not mean closed-mindedness or a focus on the preservation of folk customs. In this sense, Šalkauskis could even be accused of elitism since he saw the role of the people in culture as the preservation of folk traditions, customs, and art and understood high (universal) culture as the field of action of the enlightened and the elite, with the middle class as an intermediate link. One might ask, to what extent is this understanding of social and educational stratification based on a romanticization of the "common man"? But let us leave this aside.

Šalkauskis himself made a straightforward and practical contribution to the creation of this synthesis and to the fulfillment of his role or vocation: upon his return to Lithuania and his work at the University of Lithuania (Vytautas Magnus University), he also contributed to the development of philosophical discourse in Lithuania and in the Lithuanian language, when there were virtually no books, no translations, and no translations of the essential equivalences of philosophical terms – everything had to be created. He had to rely on books in Polish, Russian, French, German, and other languages to bring about a Lithuanian philosophical tradition into the modern age. Thus, it became possible to engage in a more general civilizational dialogue by adopting the tradition of Western philosophy (giving it "Lithuanian forms"). In this sense, one can observe the unity of intentions and actions, which the philosopher reflected quite clearly.[12]

Šalkauskis returned to the topic of cultural synthesis once again very seriously in his 1938 article "The Geopolitical Situation of Lithuania and the Problem of Lithuanian Culture." There, he describes Lithuania's situation then as that of a borderline state

12) As Juozas Girnius observed: "He perceived his philosophical vocation not as abstract thinking, but as illuminating the path for people – service to his nation. To be a philosopher is to be an educator of the nation. In his letter to Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas of 29 April 1918, Šalkauskis confessed that he considered 'philosophical work, or rather, national education through philosophy, to be his vocation.' Thus, he was not going to shut himself up in his office, but to act for the people" (Girnius, "Šalkauskio asmuo, darbai, poveikis," 22 [translated by the author]).

between Germany, Poland, and Russia (although at that time, Lithuania had no direct border with the latter). The theme of East and West is reiterated: "Lithuania, being on the East-West European divide, belongs to neither one nor the other. Although religion unites Lithuanians with the West, and although in recent times the Lithuanian nation has drawn particularly heavily from the West, its temperament, psyche, and historical heritage still unite it with the East."[13] Since Lithuania was essentially geopolitically isolated (the only friendly state with which it had a direct border was Latvia), Šalkauskis proposes neutrality as a strategic posture in international politics.

Šalkauskis, in his 1938 text, essentially acknowledges that Lithuania has been more "on the Western side" in terms of development and influence for the twenty years of its independence and, therefore, proposes a slightly different angle to the idea of cultural synthesis: the differences that need to be incorporated and reconciled are no longer visible externally, but rather internally. Much influenced by the research of his friend Kazys Pakštas, Šalkauskis sets out to consider what would happen if Lithuania were to regain Lithuania with the land of Vilnius and a bit more to the East, as envisaged in the Moscow Treaty of 1920. Looking at what political geography research and available demographic data say, he saw a new challenge – the acceptance of other cultures and the synthesis of culture within would become a new task for Lithuania. Since Lithuania would no longer be a single nation dominated state, but a multinational one, with Lithuanians making up only about 56% of the population (according to Pakštas' preliminary data), the question of the synthesis of the different cultures would become a task of political nation-building.[14]

A common national-cultural and linguistic basis for the majority of society would provide what we would nowadays call social cohesion, and the provision of cultural fusion would provide creative openness and the possibility of creating a unique culture through the interaction of all the different groups.[15] Even Šalkauskis, who

13) Šalkauskis, "Geopolitinė Lietuvos padėtis," 458 [translated by the author].

14) Ibid., 459–60.

15) Šalkauskis mentions Belgium and Switzerland as key examples of this synthetic interaction of cultures: "Swiss culture is expressed in French, German and Italian, but it is neither German, French nor Italian. Whichever language it expresses itself in, it is something new compared to German, French and Italian culture. The synthesis is a new thing compared with its constituent parts, not to mention the fact that the agents of the synthesis also bring their own individual elements to the cultural synthesis" (Ibid., 466–67 [translated by the author]).

is quite nationalistic by today's standards, does not believe that national minorities or "alienated peoples" should be "converted" to the dominant nationality through social engineering or education, so he leaves the next important point to the system – Lithuania will have to become a democracy with a "leaning toward federalism."

Democracy as a Cultural Project

Lithuanian philosophy scholars have already written about the somewhat paradoxical relationship of Šalkauskis and his students to politics. Although Šalkauskis was aware of philosophical systems in which political philosophy was one of the branches of practical philosophy,[16] he himself did not see political philosophy as a significant discipline and did not distinguish it in the classifications of his system of philosophy.[17] This, of course, does not mean that he did not care about politics. Šalkauskis was concerned throughout his life with the survival of Lithuania as a body politic and with the principles on which politics is conducted.

Šalkauskis' philosophy had a very clear practical orientation, and at the same time he wanted to see all practical action as rooted in philosophy. Hence, his emphasis on pedagogy. He was not afraid of being an ideologist because he did not understand ideology in the Marxist sense as distorting consciousness, but rather as a kind of coherent system of ideas. In his words, any phenomenon of social life "has its basis in ideas." It is often difficult to understand when Šalkauskis is speaking as a philosopher and when he is speaking as an ideologist. This should come as no surprise – one of his most famous works is titled *The Ideological Foundations of the Present Crisis and the Catholic Worldview*[18]. For him, all the crises and anti-crises of social life begin with ideas and ideologies. In other words, there is a time for philosophical questions, but there is a time for commitment to answers. It should be noted here that Šalkauskis never talked about political issues hypothetically – discussing affairs of state, at least in public, was never an intellectual game or a philosophical exercise for him. However,

16) Šalkauskis, "Enciklopedinė filosofijos įvado dalis," 109.

17) Šalkauskis, "Propedeutiniai filosofijos mokslo klausimai," 70.

18) Šalkauskis, "Ideologiniai dabarties krizių pagrindai ir katalikiškoji pasaulėžiūra", [translated by the author].

his practice-oriented and seemingly inflexible approach also shows a certain philosophical maturity.

Parallel to his ideas about cultural synthesis, he formulates one of the more interesting political concepts in the history of Lithuanian political thought – the idea of integral democracy,[19] which will later be developed by his former students in the Lithuanian diaspora.[20] The project of integral democracy envisaged the transfer of democratic representation not only to political but also to cultural, worldview (religious, freedom of conscience), and economic relations between members of society and different communities. Šalkauskis is probably one of the few significant intellectuals of the interwar period who never moved from criticism of imperfect democracy to rejection of democracy (his critical 1935 letter to the autocratic President Antanas Smetona is also worth recalling).

Šalkauskis generally rejected collectivist political thinking and emphasized personalistic elements and subsidiarity in his political texts. In his understanding of the social order, he was close to a communitarian understanding of society: any state is not made up of a collection of individuals, but of people, families, communities, and various societies and corporations, and only then of society (without losing sight of the perspective of humanity in general). So, when talking about politics and its goals, Šalkauskis not only puts the freedom or prosperity of the individual as the main goal, but also the freedom of communities.[21]

Šalkauskis was certainly not the only one who spoke about cultural autonomy, federalism, cantonization, or corporatism between the wars, but in his case it was linked to a broader program of cultural philosophy and specifically to the project

19) The adjective "integral" (in Lithuanian – "pilnutinė" or "pilnutinis") used by Šalkauskis is a translation of the French term *integrale*.

20) This concept is discussed in detail and its most important texts are collected in Girnius, Jankauskas, and Peluritis, *Lietuva, kurios nebuvo*. A brief summary of how the concept was developed by Šalkauskis' students is also available in English: Peluritis, "Lithuanian Philosophy of Culture."

21) Šalkauskis realized this early on: "Every mobilized organization, in one way or another, sets as its ultimate goal the complete flourishing of the human person" (Šalkauskis, "Dviejų pasaulių takoskyroje," 200–201 [translated by the author]). In other words, it is not the nation that needs the human being, but thinking about nations and states must be through the prism of their need for the fulfillment of the human being themself. Šalkauskis considered the perception of the inestimable dignity of man and his value as an end, not as a means, to be the highest universal civilizational achievement.

of cultural synthesis. In his 1926 political article "Matters of the Moment and the Demands of Principle," he writes: "cultural federalism is also to the advantage of all minorities because the fact that they have to live under a common law of cultural autonomy together with the majority is the best guarantee that their position will be permanently safeguarded against the chauvinistic attacks of the majority. As things stand, it is to be hoped that such a significant majority of parliamentary votes can always be obtained in defense of the law on cultural autonomy so that the cultural and spiritual life of the citizens can be protected at all times from intolerance and violence of the fanatics who are temporarily in power."[22] The idea of cultural autonomy follows consistently from the Catholic orientation toward personalism and the preoccupation with cultural synthesis, because in the cultural sphere man is not only a biological individual but also exercises his freedom as a person. His philosophical project of cultural synthesis is at the same time a presumption of democratic culture. It is not for nothing that he sees the entire history of national revival as primarily a history of democratic emancipation.[23]

Here we can also see Šalkauskis in the broader context of political philosophy: the dispute between the liberal ideals of the second half of the twentieth century, as voiced by John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas, and the communitarian ideas of the late twentieth century (especially those of Charles Taylor) cannot be considered to be over. The discourse of human rights and freedoms continues to support the ideas and relevance of constitutional patriotism. Still, at the same time, one can ask about the more intangible historical and cultural conditions that determine belonging to, or even sacrifice for, a particular political community. From a communitarian point of view, abstract constitutional patriotism is centered on common, rational, and universally accessible civic goods and values, such as democracy, the rule of law, the protection of private life and property, human and civil rights, and so forth. The fundamental flaw of civic patriotism oriented toward universals is its disconnection from a specific place and community of people. On the other hand, as Isaiah Berlin, another of the great liberal thinkers, warned, the particularist orientation of Romanticism can carry with it the dangers of relativism: how can we believe in and commit ourselves to our state

22) Šalkauskis, "Momento reikalai ir principų reikalavimai," 70 [translated by the author].

23) Šalkauskis, "Dviejų pasaulių takoskyroje," 154.

if we regard it as a historically contingent or conditional phenomenon? How can we talk about context-independent fundamental human rights and freedoms and moral standards without claiming universality and universalism? Šalkauskis would certainly be closer to the communitarians, but at the same time, he seeks to combine national particularism with universal humanism and Christianity. Šalkauskis' strength is that he tries to reconcile the two rather than picking and choosing between them. He is not satisfied with abstract and leveling universalism nor with relativistic particularism.

Šalkauskis' idea of cultural synthesis is interesting in that it refers to culture as something to be (re)created, not just something to be isolated from influence. Šalkauskis' principles of cultural synthesis can be reinterpreted in a new light as a tool for the creation of dynamic, open, modern, and expansive national European identities that are capable of preserving the best of the existing elements and incorporating new ones into them. For people to commit themselves to a given state, there is a need for respect for individual dignity or freedoms and rights (which is not relevant when people are seen only as "human resources"), and for cultural factors linking them to a place and a people. Šalkauskis clearly understood that in order to sustain a state as a political project and form, a rich cultural content was necessary and that the consideration of the creation of culture could not be separated from the consideration of the geopolitical situation of the state and a fundamental openness to differences, while at the same time not neglecting one's identity.

But meeting with the other can also be of a different kind than those described in the philosophy of culture. Sometimes, the other chooses to present themselves as an enemy or at least an adversary. What is on the other side? There is little doubt to both Šalkauskis, Koniechny, and many others that beyond Europe, to the east is Russia. But why has it, time and again, chosen to be an enemy of Europe?

The Problem of Russia

Isiah Berlin, in his famous paper "The silence in Russian culture" wrote:

> One of the most arresting characteristics of modern Russian culture is its acute self-consciousness. There has surely never been a society more deeply and exclusively preoccupied with itself, its own nature and destiny.

> From the eighteen-thirties until our own day the subject of almost all critical and imaginative writing in Russia is Russia. The great novelists, and a good many minor novelists too, as well as the vast majority of the characters in Russian novels, are continuously concerned not merely with their purposes as human beings or members of families or classes or professions, but with their condition or mission or future as Russians, members of a unique society with unique problems. This national self-absorption is to be found among novelists and playwrights of otherwise very different outlooks… . Russian publicists, historians, political theorists, writers on social topics, literary critics, philosophers, theologians, poets, first and last, all without exception and at enormous length, discuss such issues as what it is to be a Russian; the virtues, vices, and destiny of the Russian individual and society; but above all the historic role of Russia among the nations.[24]

Berlin went very far in his criticisms, saying that all those supposedly uniquely Russian cultural ideas were imported adaptations of mostly German philosophical and literary ideas. In that sense, Berlin claims, there is nothing unique about Russian culture; it is more of a variation on European ideas, but Berlin is also careful to talk about Russia as a part of Europe.

However, what he points out as self-absorption is rather paradoxically connected to a lack of self-reflection. And this is an idea that truly connects us today to the idealized Athens of ancient Greece and paints Russia as not a part of Europe. The idea of *gnōthi sauton*, culturally embodied by Socrates, or what Patočka later called caring for one's soul, is deeply connected to seeing the other. Arendt described the inability to imagine or understand the perspective of the other or the incapacity for self-reflection as an inability to think.[25] This is the cultural and philosophical crux of the matter.

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24) Berlin, "The Silence in Russian Culture," 1.

25) According to Arendt, thinking is "rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue" (Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 45).

Two very different artefacts will illustrate this. Josif Brodsky in his infamous piece, "Why Milan Kundera is wrong about Dostoyevsky" published in the New York Times in 1985, belittlingly drops these words toward the Czech author:

> Having lived for so long in Eastern Europe (Western Asia to some), it is only natural that Mr. Kundera should want to be more European than the Europeans themselves. Apart from anything else, this posture must have considerable appeal for him, because it endows his past with more logical links to the present than are normally available to an exile. It also places him at a good vantage point from which to chide the West for betraying its own values (what used to be called European civilization), and for surrendering certain countries that have tried to persevere in that civilization against terrifying odds.[26]

Would anyone who knows the long history of Prague or what the Czech Republic is today call it a backwater? It would be hard to accuse Brodsky of lacking in education just as Kundera for not being European.

But right before that, Brodsky writes:

> Mr. Kundera is a Continental, a European man. These people are seldom capable of seeing themselves from the outside. If they do, it's invariably within the context of Europe, for Europe offers them a scale against which their importance is detectable. The advantage of stratified society lies precisely in the ease with which the individual may appreciate his advancement. The reverse side of the coin, however, is that one senses limits and, beyond them, expanses where this individual's life appears irrelevant. That's why a sedentary people always resents nomads: apart from the physical threat, a nomad compromises the concept of border.[27]

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26) Brodsky, "Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky," 31.

27) Ibid.

Again, knowing Kundera, it would seem strange to accuse him of lacking in self-reflection, but this is not the main point I would like to stress, but precisely the point reiterated by Putin's sentiments not so long ago: that Russia has no borders. Brodsky, of course, mocks the idea of Europe, and yet is longing for it, thus his main argument – Dostoevsky is a part of European and even universal culture. The contradictions in which Brodsky intellectually entangles himself are partly due to trying to be ironic, partly to the exact intellectual sin he attacks Kundera for – a lack of self-understanding. He mocks the danger of "nomadic Russia" as a close-minded stereotype, but Russia time and again chooses to be the danger and presents itself as such.

Brodsky is more concerned with Kundera not liking Dostoyevsky, than Soviet (and Russian) soldiers in the streets of Prague. This of course makes Brodsky's moralizing of Kundera's aversion to Dostoyevsky only more morally tone-deaf. But it is also intellectually hilarious. Brodsky's "Flight from Byzantium," a text from the same period of his life, is even more surprising when we see that what he rejects as Byzantine, he fails to see in Russian culture.[28]

The conclusion that Brodsky fails to reach from his own position or his reading of Dostoyevsky, but also implies in his text – Russia has no self, no original culture (other than those cultures it has appropriated, incorporated, or imported), but in this sense Russia to Europe really is not the other. There is also the subtext of nihilistic expansion, which can be well illustrated with the Russian art of war: either a quick victory and then colonization; or destruction, systematic war crimes, genocide, and senseless violence (of course, there is the third option – making Russia lose). To answer Brodsky – the problem of Eastern Europe is not that it was once, or in some places multiple times, occupied by Russia, but that it was not occupied by the Roman Empire not even once (although, Brodsky, even if ironically, invokes Moscow as being the third Rome).

Another example of Russian intellectuals' perplexing lack of self-reflection comes from current academia. Alexander Etkind is one of the most celebrated and popular Russian historians, applauded for his original insights and contributions to understanding Russian history and historiographical narratives, especially Russian imperial and colonial history.[29] So, naturally, his non-scientific intellectual writings

28) See Brodsky, "Flight from Byzantium."

29) See Etkind, *Internal Colonization*.

draw a substantive amount of attention as well. His latest book, *Russia's War Against Modernity,* aims to understand Russia's transformation since the fall of the Soviet Union and provide a critical explanation of the current Russian imperial and war-like mindset. Yet, at the same time, his latest piece will leave some of his readers, who are familiar with him and his work, bewildered, perplexed, or even outraged. Why so? In short, it is a critique of Russia's war on Ukraine and Russian political elites, although it has substantial or even critical intellectual shortcomings.

First off, the book was written at the very beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. Etkind's instinct as a historian was clear – this is a big event with much to reflect on. And that is undoubtedly the case. However, it could be argued that Etkind goes for a classical historian's trope: big events require big causes and even bigger explanations. Etkind gives a very big explanation – in his mind, the current Russian war of aggression is only the tip of the iceberg of Russia's war against the West, the concept of Gaia-modernity, and the ecological transformation that endangers the Russian economic model. In his view, Russia has created its own variant of modernity – "stop-modernity", a version of paleo-modernity, oriented toward an oligarchic petrol state.[30]

The main strangeness is that Ukraine almost does not appear in Etkind's book. Sure, the colors of the Ukrainian flag appear on the cover, but for him, Ukraine is mainly a mini-alternative Russia. He even describes the war as an intergenerational conflict between "young Zelensky" and "old boomer Putin" as part of the same society.[31] He is critical of the Kremlin and colonialism, but his vision is a projection

30) As he writes: "The Russian state confronted modernity by drilling for oil and gas, occupying foreign countries, accumulating gold, subsidizing far-right movements around the world, and destroying Ukraine. Its politics was not inertial but the opposite – active, even proactive, determination. Russia's demodernization was an intentional activity, a mode of structuration that was freely chosen by the Russian elite and imposed upon the broader population, and subsequently upon the global arena" (Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity*, 7).

31) Although his remarks on the generational traits of the Putin circle have some merit:

The conditions for the war grew out of the conflicts, in Russia and Ukraine, between the septuagenarian boomers and later generations. A major divide in any country, generations are shaped by their historical experiences more than by their dates of birth, and the rupture of 1991 established a huge difference between generations. In both Ukraine and Russia, the cohort difference between the generations was larger than the ethnic difference between peers of the same generation. The distribution of power in terms of age makes this very clear. Born in the wake of World War II, Russia's rulers were deeply rooted in the Soviet period. These boomers went to Soviet schools and started their careers in Soviet collectives. (Ibid., 103)

from the Russian perspective. The danger is, as always, in tricky and sensitive matters: understanding can quickly become an apology.

Etkind, with all his intellect and erudition, already fumbles at the first step – the first sentence of the first chapter: "Before and during the Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2014, modernity was as big an issue for Russia as agency was for Ukraine."[32] Agency was not Ukraine's problem – only Russia saw the events in Ukraine as an over-abundance of agency (at the same time narrating a popular uprising as a CIA plot in their propaganda). But agency is also denied to Russia as well – all current Russian problems are traced back to the West and so-called neoliberal reforms as being at fault – a sort of revisionism without an alternative.[33] Again repeating, the narrative of the corrupting influence of the West, even though the exact opposite is true – countries that went on to have swift and decisive reforms in the 1990s became not only market economies but also stable democracies because it helped to decentralize power (e.g., the Baltic states).

The larger problem is this – our region is being once again reframed through a Russian perspective (even if the author shares the safety and comforts of Europe). Etkind states things like: "The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 giving life to fifteen independent states, Russia and Ukraine among them."[34] But, again, the Baltic states and other national revival movements were not "given life" by the collapsing soviet regime. Rather, the opposite: countries fought for their independence and paid a price for trying to disassemble the Soviet system. And Russia still poses a fundamental threat, not only politically. Even a book that aims to critique Russian colonialism is full of colonialist clichés.

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32) Ibid., 3.

33) Also, the book is riddled with factual inaccuracies, ignoring, for example, the bankruptcy of the soviet system as the main fault of Russia's economic hardships in the 1990s:

> After 1991, neoliberal reforms left millions of Russians on the brink of survival. Among the victims were the Soviet-era intelligentsia – scientists, engineers, and other professionals whose careers were previously guaranteed by the state and protected from international competition. Deindustrialization hollowed out the big Russian cities that had sprung up around paleo modern factories, mining agglomerations and military plants. But unemployment remained relatively low. By subsidizing coal and gas for industry, and diesel fuel for farms, the government supported the circulation of goods and food throughout the country. It was a special kind of sustainability, secured by traditionally low salaries, gradual depopulation and fossil fuel subsidies. All this made the deindustrialization process even more dramatic. Received in exchange for carbon, hi-tech imports displaced locally manufactured goods. (Ibid., 31)

34) Ibid., 13.

Russia is neither Western nor European not because of geographical reasons or political animosity with the West – it is not Europe because it rejects the idea of Europe as care for the soul, based on self-reflection, responsibility, and understanding of the other. The idea that Russia is beyond Europe is not an original one by any stretch of imagination.[35] These boundaries are not only cultural, but also philosophical in nature.[36] Two pieces of writing, of course, are nowhere near the evidence needed for such a conclusion. Still, both authors were well-embedded in Western culture, so this leaves a firmly opened door for further examination of Russian exceptionalism, imperialistic chauvinism, and its relation (or rather the negation of) the idea of Europe.

35) Samuel Huntington's concept is sometimes considered to be one of the most influential concepts of the late twentieth century, all the more so because it at least partially foreshadowed the Balkan wars. According to it, the hallmarks of Western civilization are the heritage of classical Greek and Roman civilization, Western Christianity, the plurality of languages, the separation of spiritual and secular power, the rule of law, social pluralism, political representation, and individualism. For Huntington, the frontier of Western civilization lies through Ukraine and Belarus. But he attributed Western civilization only to the Western parts of these countries. As a result, he considered most of Ukraine to be akin to Russia. Some might argue that this probably determined the fate of Ukraine's nuclear weapons. We could argue that there is a clear lack of understanding of Ukrainian history and culture and also a misunderstanding of orthodox Christianity (the Russian czarist version is only one iteration of orthodoxy). Similar notes can be said about Belarus (Bumblauskas, "Vilniaus universitetas," 8–9).

36) It is very important to note the corrections to Huntington's concept made by the Solidarity intellectual and professor of geopolitics Leszek Moczulski. He pushed the boundaries of European civilization much further to the East than Huntington proposed. According to Moczulski, the frontier of European civilization in the nineteenth century still encompassed the entire area of the former Polish and Lithuanian states annexed to the Russian Empire, hence Belarus and Ukraine (Moczulski, *Geopolityka*, 276). Lithuanian historian Alfredas Bumblauskas draws attention to some lines that would place the East-West divide somewhere around Mariupol (or the frontline between 2014 and 2022). First, there is the boundary between individual farming and Russian communal farming. Secondly, the boundary that allowed Jewish settling was on Mariupol – the Russian Empire forbade Jews to move and live further east. There is also the border of the former Ukrainian Hetmanate. Even after the annexation of eastern Ukraine to Russia, after the Khmelnytskyi Revolt, the Ukrainian Hetmanate existed for a century. The Hetmanate was abolished only in the middle of the eighteenth century. Third, the limits of Latin education. The Hetmanate is essential here too because under Mazepa, the system of education established by Peter Mohyla's Kyiv Academy in the first half of the seventeenth century was influential for a long time afterward (Jesuit ideas on education also influenced it as well). This is a remainder of deeper cultural boundaries separating Europe from Russia (Bumblauskas, "Vilniaus universitetas," 8–9).

Instead of Conclusions

The paradigms of globalization and the global world order are losing their relevance. New security challenges lie ahead, in particular the growing axis of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. This confrontation no longer fits into the relativist model of "cultural differences" or the liberal model of cooperation through trade and exchange. In economics, there is already talk of regionalization, fragmentation, and even deglobalization. Isolationism, protectionism, mercantilism are once again seriously discussed in political and economic forums. In the twenty-first century, not only the developed and rich countries but also the economically developing countries are already moving toward an aging society and, in some places, depopulation. Although these trends are partly offset by immigration, the latter is causing increasing political and cultural tensions.

The discourse in the social sciences and humanities has not yet reflected these new post-globalization trends and future challenges. Neither defensive nationalism nor its critique offers relevant ideas on how the relationship with one's own political community, its history, and culture should change in the face of new challenges. In Central-Eastern Europe, the challenges to demographic, economic, and social development, political, and cultural problems can no longer be explained by the post-socialist or post-Soviet legacies alone, as most countries in the region have become part of the developed world (both politically and economically).

Returning to the idea of Šalkauskis and what was said about the idea of Europe. The idea of cultural synthesis is indeed a Central and Eastern European idea. What Šalkauskis failed to see is the complexity of our region and even Lithuania from within rather than without. His openness to otherness talked about the big others but forgot the small Other. The problem, though, is – the cultural mixture that was Central and Eastern Europe before the Second World War no longer exists. In countries like Lithuania, German nazis and their local collaborators killed more than 97 percent of Jews – not only destroying concrete people but a whole culture and social structure. But we must also not forget the tragedy of the Roma people, ethnic conflicts boiling over into ethnic cleansings, repatriation, and waves of refugees after the war and then the destruction of the social fabric started by the Bolsheviks and their collaborators in 1939–1940 and then again from 1944 onward. The chance of inner cultural synthesis

has been postponed, but Šalkauskis' project of cultural synthesis could be reinterpreted as a fundamental openness to otherness – to our neighbors. Cultural synthesis can leave the openness to connect national, democratic ideals, and European identity rather than go on the path of competing sovereignties.

Secondly, Šalkauskis thought that peripheral, limitrophe, or borderland states should strive for political neutrality. With our experience of Russia and Europe's transformation after the Second World War and the Cold War, this is, of course, *naïveté*. What the ideas on the cultural synthesis and borderland experience universally agree on – Russia is beyond Europe. The lack of decolonizing and self-reflective intellectual resources in Russian culture makes it more than a historical or political problem.

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