The periphery of the EU in the centre of Europe. About borders and relational locations: the case of Polish-Belarusian borderland.

I. EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY

Let me start with a piece of auto-ethnography. In early 1990s, whenever I was coming back from journeys around Western Europe, crossing the German-Polish border and driving out of a perfectly smooth asphalt onto a bumpy and paved road built back in Nazi times, I had a feeling of crossing the border between two different worlds, between the West and the East. These feelings changed significantly whenever I moved to the eastern border of Poland, where bothersome formalities and oppressive bureaucratic procedures applied by brusque border guards gave me a very acute sense that again this is the exact border when the East and the West meet. But once unexpectedly on my return from an expedition to Tajikistan, when in an atmosphere of danger and uncertainty caused by the war in the neighbouring Afghanistan our team managed finally to get into the last operating train from Dushanbe to Moscow, I remember this incredible relief when approaching the borders of Russia knowing that here at last I was coming back to the safe European world. And again this was the border of the East and the West. These various senses of westness and eastness, the movement and changeable meanings associated with geopolitical and symbolical borders only proved what an unclear, ambiguous and undefined concept Europe is. There has never been one idea of Europe and its borders, only its outlines and different realizations, reflecting various configurations of power, desires and expectations.

II. OPENING - CLOSING

Many authors point to the relational nature of boundaries: their creation and reproduction always happens in a specific context, and is affected by events from different scales: from strictly local to global. Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 undoubtedly elevated Polish borders to the new transnational status, significantly altering their function and importance. Two key connotations come to mind, both physical and symbolic: opening
and closing. On the one hand, there is the open border between Poland and Germany and the EU narration of eliminating political, economic and socio-cultural divides, of free movement of people, goods and ideas. On the other hand though, strengthening Poland’s eastern borders: with Russia, Belorussia and Ukraine, highlights social and economic distance and effectively separates the communities on two sides of the border. This internal contradiction within the very idea of the European Union has been highlighted repeatedly. Striving for inclusion and reducing differences while simultaneously excluding and intensifying divisions elsewhere, the EU has been labelled ‘gated community’. However, another important aspect is that the borders of the EU overlap and interact with local, regional, national and global context present in their history, social and cultural setting, and adding more complexity to the issues of openness and closing.

The paradox of Poland’s borders lies in the fact that the EU’s ‘unity in diversity’ discourse of cross-border cooperation, community and breaching divides is far more applicable to the Eastern regions, where it harmonizes with the local traditions of communal life and everyday practices typical for multicultural communities. The current Polish-German borderland had never been one in the strict sense of the word. The border established arbitrarily after WWII caused mass population shifts: the removal of German population and arrival of settlers from Central and Eastern Poland. And in spite of the loss of its political importance and its physical disappearance after Schengen, ethnographical studies conducted in the area reveal that it continues to exist in the minds of the local population. The freedom to move and settle on the other side of the border, numerous EU programmes aimed towards social and cultural integration of the area, do not lessen to much extend the distance and differences related to economic inequalities, language difference, social and individual memories of the dramatic wartime and post-war events, etc.

III. DISCONNECTION FROM RELATIONSHIPS

The situation is markedly different in the East of Poland. The areas currently cut off by the political frontier of the EU for many ages formed a borderland, under the influences of different states (Poland, Russia) and their ideologies, nationalist or nation-forming movements (Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Belorussian), religious institutions and traditions (Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Protestantism), language diversity (with their various vernacular and literary forms) and social structures (in particular
in relations between the peasantry and upper class). This is an area where borders underwent multiple shifts and modifications, which instilled in the local populations the sense of their instability and insignificance. The arbitrary and context-driven nature of frontiers is a thoroughly recognized phenomenon and applies not only to the geopolitical demarcation lines, more notably, imagined division lines, social distance and differences. The cultural identities that come into play in this context have also been changing and interpenetrating. This is reflected in aspects such as diglossia - active multilingualism, switching freely between to or more languages, depending on the social situation; participating in the religious life of the individual’s faith as well as the neighbours’ (Orthodox and Catholic), celebrating religious events in both orders and even bidenominational practice (attending services and parish events of two churches interchangeably) and fluid, at times double or triple ethnic-national identification. Local cultures of the eastern border areas can do well without ideological formatting, as is the case in the West, because for generations they have been naturally embodying the idea of multiculturality. Sealing Poland-Belorussia and Poland-Ukraine frontiers that followed Poland’s accession to the EU, after ten years of only moderately mitigated movement of people and goods between the countries in question, has been felt particularly acutely. Closing the frontier contributed significantly to the political and economic marginalization of the eastern border areas and weakened cultural activity in the region. While statistics show a significant drop in the activities of various institutions involved in cross-border cooperation and exchange after 2004, disrupted relations and networks have not been the only to suffer.

IV. ORIENTALISATION

Another important aspect of EU’s Eastern borders drives the region’s symbolic marginalization. For ages the area was referred to as Kresy - Commonwealth Frontiers, which in the ideology developed around it implied the end of a safe world. Beyond it was the vast Russian Empire, perceived as a continuous threat to the integrity of Poland as a state and Poles as a nation. As such Kresy was a buffer between Poland and Russia. Additionally, Russia never ceased to regard the area as their domain, mainly due to the presence of Orthodox Church believers and linguistic affinity between Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian that was to prove that they belong ‘naturally’ in the pan Slavic realm. Contrarily to the official discourse of long-standing tolerance of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for
people of national and religious affiliations, Eastern Orthodox Christians had long remained second-rate citizens and were not afforded the full rights enjoyed by the members of the dominant Catholic Church. Hence, the majority of initially Orthodox nobility and gentry gradually converted to Catholicism. This in turn led to the former faith to be associated with peasantry (common faith), and Catholicism with nobility (high faith). The asymmetry of prestige and associating religious denominations with social status has continued to this day, causing even Orthodox Christians to perceive their religion as the ‘lesser’ faith. The discourse of Kresy was a colonial one justifying the intense polonization that took place in the region in the inter-war period. The discourse of “civilizational mission” that the government units were to accomplish subjected the communities of Eastern Borderland to orientalization pointing directly to their inferior status. After WWII, despite the fact that the area was locked within the borders of USSR, the discourse of Kresy continued in nostalgic mode, particularly in literature, memories of people repatriated from the region and revisionist programmes of returning to the ‘lost territories’. Another, parallel discourse used in reference to the region was the borderline narrative, a somewhat idealized vision of peaceful cohabitation of people representing different religions and nationalities, particularly popular after 1989, which became an effective instrument of bolstering the region’s subjectivity and uniqueness. The new frontier of EU-Europe represses the discourse of borderland and stands on the shoulders of the one of Kresy and again orientalizes and stigmatizes this part of Europe. It does so by shutting it out of the ‘better’ world and, indirectly, from the imagined “European” community.

V. LOCAL RESPONSE

While the Eastern border of Poland has so far been a political one, it is currently transitioning into a civilizational divide. From the local perspective, it is viewed as degrading and contradicting the values advocated by the EU. Local elites approach with reserve ‘Europeanisation’ programmes that are to spread the new models of tolerance and normative visions of abstract multiculturalism. In local compensatory narratives, areas perceived as the periphery of Europe are presented as its very centre, a place where the East and West meet, as do Roman and Byzantine Christian traditions, a place where shared values are developed. By negating the symbolic importance of the EU border, local communities affirm their agency and contradict the idea of Europeanism as presented by the EU.