Conclusion Can the Story of Europe be Told from its Eastern Borderlands?

Most of the extant geopolitical scholarship on post–Soviet area studies views borderland countries mainly as objects in the power projection of major strategic players, such as the EU and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other. In this book we analysed this concept from a different core presumption. We treat Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia as subjects on their own, each one carving out its own *modus operandi* selecting poles of attraction and choosing their own modality of freedom of action. Politically, Estonia had a well–articulated interest to integrate with the EU and NATO and was prepared to give up parts of its sovereignty to these institutions in exchange for security and economic growth. It was the Georgian government, during the times of Saakashvili's presidency, to opt for a confrontational style of relations with the Kremlin; and it was Ukraine's collective will, expressed through EuroMaidan, to break its dependency on Russia and start a qualitatively more intense integration with Europe.

All three countries brought together in this book, share historical experiences of non–imperial statehood. They are rather fragmented and they alternated between submission to external powers and periods of autonomy or independence. A paradox of the Soviet system was its imperial inclusiveness. The Soviet Union was able to contain and even eradicate separatism in its constitutive units, until the whole edifice collapsed under the pressure of intractable centre–periphery imbalances. The gist of the post–Soviet transformation, as seen from this prism, is to find non-imperial modes of inclusiveness conducive to harmony within national identity spaces.

Against this backdrop it is highly important that borderlands are producers of cultural forms that can be conceptualized in the logic of celebration. The celebratory expressions, representations, symbolizations and significations of national identities date back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This was a structural event that most of the new post–Soviet states perceived as a chance for restoring their independence and (re)building national statehood, as opposed to the catastrophic discourse dominant in Russia, especially after Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000. This celebration–versus–mourning dilemma not only

split the post–Soviet space, but also caused domestic ruptures in many new independent states, since some of them (including Ukraine and Georgia) lost territories where there remained strong pro-Russian and even pro–Soviet sympathies.

In all three cases analysed in this book, we have seen that various expressions of nationalism are to a large extent protective and aimed at preserving national identities from external encroachments. Being located in a zone where Europe and Russia's cultural influences conflate, these nations face a challenge to find their niches in a political environment that from year to year becomes increasingly complicated and prone to multiple conflicts. Pro–European sympathies, which are fluid and dependent on a variety of structural matters, have not in Ukraine and Georgia opened membership opportunities for them. Yet even those countries, such as Estonia, that have decisively and uncompromisingly broken with the Soviet past and opted for a European future, have had to face multiple pressure from a self–assertive Russia and attempt to integrate a sizeable Russian speaking population.

Global dynamics are another variable accounting for a variety of celebratory forms of national self–identification. While constructing their national discourses and imageries, many post-Soviet countries started exploring international branding strategies, using for this purpose highly visible cultural and sporting events. This unleashed practices of commodification that translate nation building into nation branding, based on a certain type of aesthetic imagery meant for external consumption. The increasing role of artistic elements in national discourses and representation is a direct result of the above.

Having deployed the three objects of this research in a complex Europe–Russia framework, we have uncovered important zones of incongruence of their cherished cultural forms of nationalism with the two external dominant poles. For many in Europe some nationalist manifestations in post–Soviet countries look questionable, including rigid citizenship rules in Estonia, sporadic neo–Nazi exposure in Ukraine, or pro-Stalinist sympathies in Georgia. From their part, in neither of these countries was adaptation of EU norms automatic or taken–for–granted; Europeanization is a complex process with ebbs and flows, in which nothing is predetermined. In this respect it would be erroneous to overrate the ability of the EU to foster fast and effective changes in neighbouring countries, especially when it comes to normative aspects of their identities.

Even greater divergences exist between the nation–building projects in the three countries and Russia. For the Kremlin these strong national identities are conceptual challengers to its major foreign policy platforms, including the civilizational concept of Eurasianism, the Russian world doctrine, and a neo–Soviet revisionism. In all three cases we have uncovered discursive mechanisms of othering Russia as an external actor and an outsider that needs to be kept at a certain distance.

In academic literature much has been said about Europe and Russia's various impacts on borderlands. Yet can we reverse this centre–periphery logic and ask whether Europe and Russia can, perhaps paradoxically, be defined from the margins? The subtitle of this concluding part of the book is a replica of Pertti Joenniemi's (2002) article entitled "Can Europe be told from the North?" in which the Finnish researcher raised an innovative question of whether "speaking 'Europe' is also possible from a peripheral perspective". Our answer would be affirmative. In practical terms, Estonia, being an EU insider, does its best to convince its European allies of the effectiveness of its internal integration policy, yet also in the validity of its threat perceptions as related to Russia's potentially destructive role in the Baltic Sea Region and beyond. Ukraine and Georgia as EU outsiders can indirectly either confirm the force of EU policy tools, including governmentality and norm projection, or, vice versa, disprove the EU's normative ambitions in the post–Soviet region.

This book offers a more radical version of borderlands' abilities to influence centres, since we consider as "Europe-makers" not only border–located EU member states, but also non–EU countries. The latter are largely absent from the current debate on Europe, and usually connote something marginal and "pertaining to the past".[401] To some extent this approach aims at reversing traditional core–periphery relations and addressing our target countries as identities on the move with different imageries of Europe. Estonia's Europe is a political community that values norm–based solidarity over pragmatic interests and normative compromise with Russia. Ukraine's Europe is a source of moral inspiration and material support, as well as an institutional protector against incursions from Russia. Georgia's Europe is a yardstick for measuring the success of domestic reforms, and a source of legitimizing the ruling regime.

401 *Joenniemi*, Can Europe Be Told from the North? Tapping into the EU's Northern Dimension, P.24.

In many respects we can project this logic to Russia as well. Can its identity be, at least partly, shaped or influenced from the borderlands? Again, our answer is positive. Ukraine has already become a major deterrent for the whole concept of the Moscow–led re–assembling of empire. By the same token, the degree of acceptance of the Russian world concept among Russian speakers in Estonia, as well as in other Baltic States, is a decisive factor in shaping the future of Russia's compatriot policy. The same goes for Georgia's acceptance (or rejection) of the Russia–inspired social conservative agenda translated through the Russian Orthodox Church and some civil society organizations.

In this sense there is indeed a strong emancipatory momentum in borderland subjectivity. In the post–colonial conceptualization it "emerges primarily from the people's anti-imperial responses to the colonial difference...that hegemonic discourse endowed to 'other' people, classifying them as inferior and at the same time asserting its geo–historical and body–social configurations as superior and the models to be followed. These people refuse to be geographically caged, subjectively humiliated and denigrated and epistemically disregarded".[402] But in accentuating the empowerment and liberation from old dependencies, the post–colonial argument seems to elide two important aspects of this process, internal ruptures within borderland identities and their vulnerabilities in situations of direct or indirect confrontation with external powers. These two aspects might overlap, since exploiting domestic disruptions is one of Russia's neo–imperial tools.

Indeed, all three countries face problems of domestic integrity and cohesion. Estonia not only balances between positioning itself as a Baltic and Nordic country, but also struggles to find the best way to integrate the Russian speaking minority. Ukraine, especially its western part, similarly balances between eastern and central European regional identities, and has to deal with the difficult challenge of reassembling the country after the Russian–inspired military insurgency in the eastern provinces. Georgia's regional identity leans more towards a Black Sea regional pole of attraction, rather than to the South Caucasus, while domestically, again, the country desperately tries to reintegrate the breakaway Russian–supported territories.

---

402 *Mignolo and Tlostanova*, Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge, P.208.

The domestic splits and ruptures co–exist with the reinvigoration and fixation of the system of external divisions. The latter is rooted in the grounding of nation building projects in a double denial, both of the Soviet past and the policies pursued by some neighbouring countries. Some of the ensuing policy lines are distinct, as in the case of Estonia and Russia or Georgia and Russia; in other cases lines of distinction are less visible but still exist, as, for example, between Ukraine and Poland. The gravitation of western Ukraine to a "Polish (cultural) world" can be only partial, and is always counterbalanced by the opposite trend.

Yet even the politically rigid territorial borders are diffused by the overlapping cultural, ethnic and religious spaces, which can be illustrated by the case of Narva, an "island" of the imaginary and largely utopian Russian world within Estonia. This is what communities of Russian speakers in Estonia and Orthodox believers in Georgia, share. Both can't be easily integrated in either the Russian world or the European normative order.

In this sense, "boundaries may manifest themselves in practices and institutions that produce distinction".[403] It is the feeling of not belonging, or "internal exclusion",[404] which leads to the construction of cultural distances and the laying out of political boundaries, between Russian speakers in Estonia and the dominant Estonian cultural majority, between western Ukrainians and the Ukrainian political mainstream, and between Abkhazians or South Ossetians and Georgians. Yet this sense of non–belonging can also extend to Ukrainians and Georgians in a European normative space where they often feel themselves at the margins, not necessarily because of any EU, or Russian, intentional policy of marginalization EU, but rather due to the irreducible specificity of borderland identities which sets boundaries with any hegemons.

Therefore, some borderland identities, exposing themselves through a variety of cultural practices, are constructed on permeable and perforated boundaries, while others have stricter lines of demarcation. Paradoxically,

> "in a world that is characterized by transnational contact in the absence of grand ideological divides between states, it may be cultural boundaries that become more rigid and less permeable...Ironically, in a situation where the border regime relaxed and cold war enmities ceased to exist, the differences

403 *Paasi*, The resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe, P. 137.

404 *Zizek*, The Sublime Object of Ideology, P.158.

> between people on both sides of the border did not diminish. Instead, the former cold war border became more 'truly' a divide between Islam and Christianity, Georgians and Turks, and Asia and Europe".[405]

Due to the resilience of cultural divides, borderlands can implement only a partial suturing function. The limitations of suturing can be explained through reference to the triadic distinction between the whole, the part and the remainder as seen in the works of Jacques Ranciere and his followers.[406] It is the latter component, the non–integrated remainder, that is of the utmost importance here, since it resists the perspective of dissolution of group identities in larger supra–national or trans–national projects, as many critics of globalization fear. The remainder spells a cultural distance, a boundary that prevents the system's foreclosure, or smaller identities being absorbed by hegemonic poles.

In this structurally complex environment of multiple modalities of inclusion and exclusion in borders and boundaries, there is always an inherent potential for political momentum to implode. But politicization is by no means automatic, it is a contingent process for which the main conditions are the ability of non–integrated parts to articulate their exclusion as meaningful and consequential for the Whole [407] which in this context is a wider Europe. There are at least two factors that block politicization. One is that Europe, as a (if not the) key reference point for many nation–building discourses and imageries, remains an inherently elusive concept as it resists semantic anchoring and is always in a state of permanent flux. Its boundaries are always embracing a variety of mutually exclusive meanings, which complicates the articulation of someone's identity in strictly European terms as a gesture of politically distinguishing it from a "non–Europe".

Secondly, as discussed in the cases, the political momentum is counterbalanced by the logic of celebration and enjoyment, be it in the form of commodified global sporting shows and festivals, or inward–looking, in the deeply felt innermost cultural events that sustain the spirit of national unity. With their strong depoliticizing background, celebratory events remain one of the strongest cultural assets for articulating, visualizing and publicly presenting national and regional distinctions.

---

405 *Pelkmans*, Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia, P. 224.

406 *Tanke*, Jacques Ranciere: An Introduction. Philosophy, Politics, Aesthetics, P. 45.

407 *Zizek*, For a Leftist Appropriation of the European Legacy.