

Europe a Country of Borders

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The geo-political space of Europe has been transformed by the political upheavals in Eastern Europe. Tearing down the Iron Curtain has revealed Europe for what it is – a continent that cannot exist without internal borders. The demarcation line that stretched from the Baltic to the Adriatic has been grassed over but it will be a long time before the tensions it generated are erased from the consciousness of the present generation. It is as if the Wall has moved Eastward: from the centre of Berlin it has moved to the Oder or even further – as far as Brest. The symbol of a divided world may have disappeared but symbols of new divisions are appearing in its place. The euphoria that accompanied the overthrow of tyrants and their bastions has turned into a passion for constructing new fortifications along new frontiers. Following the demolition of the epoch-marking divide between East and West, two different time zones confront each other. The old authorities have been deposed; new ones have to be installed in their place. Once the right to freedom of speech has been won it is no longer possible to silence voices of opposition. Where before, the struggle against a common cause brought about unity, now there may be a multiplicity of internal conflicts as different groups strive with one another to take control. The most pressing need is to direct resources to the regeneration of economically depressed states, but priority often seems to be given to acquiring new forms of privilege. In areas which have recently won their independence, groups are created which form alliances or become opponents of other groups, often on the basis of nationality. At the moment when Europe is asserting itself, there is a growing animosity towards ‘aliens’. Recognition of what’s ‘mine’ often goes hand in hand with condemnation of what’s ‘theirs’. After preaching tolerance for so long, it now seems that tolerance is, after all, good only for one’s own kind. At the moment when human rights are once again under threat, they are accorded only occasional lip service. We are witnessing not the disappearance of a frontier but its metamorphosis. Emerging Europe is not a Europe without frontiers. It is a Europe that will have to decide how it is going to live with those frontiers.

The simplicity of the ‘great divide’

The Iron Curtain was as simple as the situation it held in check. When Europe was divided life was predictable. Post-war Europe was predicated on the threat of mutual annihilation. Its stability depended on the inter-Continental coexistence of

missile silos in Utah and Krasnoyarsk, and on high-level meetings in Vienna and Geneva. Not a single manoeuvre went unnoticed on the radar screens of underground surveillance centres in Moscow and Omaha. Tourists, even those whose only interest was in quite innocuous tourist attractions, had dossiers opened on them. The only subversive elements during that period were special service agents and, later, dissidents. Surveillance along the entire perimeter required an unprecedented use of resources and brainpower.

The world's strongest economies worked to maintain the balance of power and its brightest minds were engaged in propping up the status quo. The slightest shift in this balance resulted in the threat of nuclear war. Human intellect was equal to this risky game: the deadly strike was averted. Europe gained the time it needed to pull itself together again. Workers of Shetsin and Dantzig¹, defenders of human rights in Prague, "organic intellectuals" of Budapest (Georgi Konrad) took their chance behind the back of the militarised status quo. When military might alone could no longer prevail they were ready to act. Demobilisation could now begin.

Precision and discipline had been the key elements in maintaining the mutual siege between East and West. The control of the state of emergency was based on the "threat and counter threat" of nuclear deterrence. The border that passed across post-war Europe corresponded to the state of emergency. It shaped our lives; it was part of our life even if we did not live in its vicinity. It provided the form of security that comes from knowing that in extreme circumstances there is a real threat that force will be used. Along that border the world lay divided into black and white, good and evil, freedom and oppression. We might lose ourselves in our hard daily routine, but the simplicity of that border remained unshakeable. It was a system of co-ordinates plotting the space where, between life and death, success and failure passed the life curve of a generation. Here, back to back, stood the warring factions of Europe. The "Iron Curtain" formed an invisible internal axis, a backbone. This demarcation line drawn on the map of Europe was an exact expression of a new world order within which things changed places: Prague became a twin town with Ulan-Bator; palaces of culture of identical design were built in Warsaw and in Peking; East Berlin was a city in Eastern Europe, whereas West Berlin was determined to become more American than America itself. This internal axis disappeared once the world that had needed it no longer had a use for it.

Disappearance of the "threat and counter threat" premise

The revolution in Eastern Europe did not blow up the well-defined border but overcame it, causing the disintegration of the formerly hermetically sealed space. Diffusion of the Clean and the Unclean began. And it all happened so quietly. Where we were accustomed to see a single 'bloc', new states appeared overnight. This was unthinkable without self-control, a consciousness of the risk of taking the next step, knowing from past experience that the next step might always be the last. The "threat – counter threat" system had been universally understood. The "grey zone" – in which the common history would be played out in future,

demanded much greater talents. The revolutionaries of the Central and East European countries were at the peak of their power. They had long abandoned the “threat – counter threat” system – the lifeblood of military strategists. They were masters of ambiguity. The momentum of events, crucial to everything, meant more to them than stated policy objectives that achieved nothing no matter how often they were repeated. These revolutionaries were tactical geniuses, and to an even greater degree – geniuses of tact. They enriched the history of political theory with the life-saving compromise of “self-controlled revolution”. They were independent enough to measure their strengths against generals, torturers and the hated nomenklatura. Their self-esteem remained intact when they, former prisoners and dissidents, sat at the “round table” with the holders of power. Their strength stemmed from their ability to bring about immediate change, not from having a vision of the future. The name of their virtue was “present awareness”. They allowed the old authorities to resign and managed the dismantling of an old order. When after so many false dawns the moment for change finally arrived, they seized their historic moment, and gave a voice to the process they had set in motion. They worked a miracle: the appearance of a new world order that was not the result of war. Practically everywhere the “change of system” happened without revolution or bloodshed.

Europe in transition

Once Europe was freed from the “great divide”, everything started to shift, beginning with the space that we inhabit. The disappearance of the wall created a different space. The distance between Berlin and Breslau is far greater than the two hours it takes to drive. The border is no longer a place where you have to hold your breath, where time stands still and officials inflict petty humiliations. In Hedsalome, Khebe, Zgozhelets one can still see remnants of the bureaucratic obstacles that used to impede the traveller. Helmstadt is just the kind of place to take a break from driving, a small, quaint town whose more important past is known only to older travellers: once it was a sort of border lock between two worlds. We see how the space in which we work, study, rest and live is changing and that alters our mental image of the world. The tourist who wants to broaden his outlook travels to a neighbouring region instead of crossing the ocean. After visiting New York, the time has finally come to travel to Prague. And not necessarily as a tourist, but for professional and business reasons. The need for the free exchange of business communications is on the increase. Borders are now crossed for pragmatic, non-humanitarian reasons: there are plenty of things to do. In passing to make new acquaintances, for example, in the shops, during studies, on holiday or when looking for work. That exotic zone that provoked so many bitter and sweet imaginings is gone. Now new impressions and opinions, some favourable, others less so, are formed on the basis of experience.

Economic change becomes visible. It can be seen on the motorways on Sunday evenings when tens of thousands of East European workers drive to the prosperous industrial regions of south-eastern Germany, then come back to Dresden, Halle and Gerlitz for the weekend. It can be observed in the development and

acceleration of inter-European exchange, in columns of trailers from Poland, Scandinavia and south-eastern Europe merging on the Berlin ring road. The change in direction of European passenger traffic can be gleaned from the German railway timetable. New industrial regions are springing up; telltale signs are the black limousines of executives and representatives on the highways between Plzen and Folksburg, Vienna and Prague, Munich and Dresden, Hamburg and Shetsin. Border countries once again become the axes of an ever-increasing flow of people and goods. But, perhaps, the clearest indicator of the creation of a new space is the volume of trade – a multi-million traffic of goods from all over the world, personally ferried between St Petersburg and Berlin, Istanbul and Odessa, Poznan and Ulan-Bator, Sintzian and Kazakhstan. Old routes – just like the Amber and Silk Roads – are in use once more. Delays at the border at Brest and Grodno prove that the road and rail networks have long become inadequate for the increasing volume of goods being exchanged. Radical changes will have to be implemented to ease this congestion.

After the demise of the ‘great divide’ and the effort that went into supporting it, Europe seems weary. It appears that its constituent parts have gone back to the pre-Yalta state, and, perhaps, even as far back as Trianon. Europe had learned to accept its post-war condition as a nearly normal state of affairs. Suddenly it turns out to be artificial and obsolete. The European bloc crumbles into a series of archipelagoes. Regions drift apart. Channels have to be opened up to preserve neighbourly relations threatened by war. Even though the wall has gone, we are seeing in Europe once again closed cities, divided cities, cities under blockade as well as the newly open cities.

The major division in the world at the present time is probably that arising from the tension between Rome and Byzantium. Some see Western Europe as under threat once again; to others it is very clear that Europe does not stretch further than the Bug. Everyone insists that his vision is the one and only true Europe. This is how, little by little, the parts of the former whole increasingly diverge. Large areas disappear and so does the freedom of travel. A new provincialism begins to appear. People flock to one place and desert another. Baltic beaches apart from Riga and Tallinn are empty. A handful of tourists cannot replace the hordes of holiday-makers who used to come from all corners of the empire. After becoming part of the Ukraine, the Crimea has lost its holiday-makers and the institutions to run its resorts and finds itself on its own. Grenades burst on the boulevards of Sukhumi. Intelligent people from Armenia and Azerbaijan who spoke the same language in Moscow now vie with one another in mutual hatred. COMECON, the organisation for mutual economic assistance, has disintegrated: the Soviet Union, an exporter of iron, oil and gas, no longer exists: everything is traded at world prices. The power stations of Vilnius and Tallinn are halted. The economies of Central and Eastern Europe have little chance of breaking into West European markets. As a result, we witness the creation of a massive intermediary zone, full of bankruptcies, crises, unemployment and uncertainties. The flow of ‘shuttles’ mixes with the stream of refugees as new exiles appear among the travellers at European railway stations and airports.

Symbols of the 'closed world' of the Eastern bloc exist today only as archives and ruins. Instead of the internationalism that tried to break through the bloc's boundaries we have national symbols; in place of the former collectivism we see individual and private enterprise and exact addresses instead of anonymity. In short: 'the system' and 'the Eastern bloc' have disappeared. Change has meant adapting to a new system. Now there is a need to be conversant with different countries, with different social systems, with diverse languages and cultures. There is another East apart from the Eastern bloc and there is a Europe that does not fit with the idea that Europeans have of themselves. A new world is taking over from where the old one ended and history is starting again where it had once seemed about to come to an end. Behind the 'system' that we thought we knew, lay virgin land waiting to be discovered.

Metamorphosis of the border

The border did not vanish; it reappeared, albeit in an altered form. It has become just as multi-faceted as the new relationship. In some places it has become invisible and lives only in recollections, gestures and habits that betray their old origins 'from over there'. In some places it appears as an actual border, demarcated by languages and mountain ridges. The reverse has also happened: borders have appeared where there were none before. People accustomed to unhindered traffic inside an endless Empire are now forced to adjust to frontiers, checks and crossings with all their accompanying hassle. Borders have forced apart families and generations that until then, even if their lives were hard, had lived in peace with one other.

The 'great divide' undergoes many metamorphoses. It has been eliminated and stops no-one, except perhaps those who lack the money to cross it or do not have the correct documents. For those who had learnt to overcome much more complex obstacles in their long flight it presents no problem. The disappearance of the 'great divide' allows one to look freely at an abyss that is more intractable than the old threatening wall with its watchtowers and barbed wire. Europe has abolished its shoot-to-kill zones but is now riddled with new trenches and death zones. Advocates of so-called natural borders can be heard everywhere. Highway bandits, Rambos armed with machine guns, who set themselves up as lords of newly seized territory and masters of frontiers, appear on ancient roads and routes. It does not take much to play the geo-political game in Europe. Weapons, so freely available in the civilised world, give any bandit the power over life and death. Everywhere symbols of statehood are changed or newly created. Often it seems as if a border is all that is required to create a state and that the segregation of 'aliens' is a precondition for establishing one's 'own' identity. Self-determination is weak when it demands segregation from others.

Living with borders

Borders are the external 'plating' of states, the sphere of their contacts and frictions. They show us where the road is likely to lead before we reach the capital of the state. They embody the essence of the states that begot them. The strength of border fortifications is inversely proportional to a state's internal stability and directly proportional to its internal pressure. Strongly fortified borders are a sign of the fragility of what they are designed to protect. The signs that identify them are threats or warnings, depending on the direction of travel. Dictatorships can be spotted from afar by their border posts. Their entry is barricaded; the view from the windows obscured with frosted and darkened glass. Cars approaching the border crossing are forced to negotiate a slalom track. Travellers are escorted into cabins or partitioned spaces. There, strangers carry out a body search, looking for printed matter. Even the most carefree harbours the thought that, for the duration of his stay, anything may happen at any time if he commits the slightest misdemeanour. The apparently welcoming mood of the border guards is false. Lightning changes of facial expression can indicate a complete change of mood. For a lowly subordinate, an encounter with someone from another world at the border crossing provides him with his one and only chance to assert his authority. The first indication of technological advance, in the most backward dictatorships, is always at the borders – a transition from handwritten cards to computers. The actual process of crossing a border is unnerving in itself. The entrant arrives in a room and steps into a blinding cone of light, illuminated from all sides like an insect. He moves cautiously – conscious that he is stepping into a no-man's-land where dangers lurk. He forces himself to suppress his natural urge to protest against these demeaning procedures because of his desire to be granted the right of entry.

The alternative is not the absence of a border altogether but a border that is nothing more than a demarcation line, mapping the limits of a territory and indicating a crossing point. This is not an unattainable cosmopolitan dream, but a border that allows life to carry on without hindrance. It is the border that creates the living space within it. In regions without borders life can be difficult. The border we are talking about is just a crossing, a staging post, but it gives a sense of belonging. Such a border does not intimidate; on the contrary, it has an appeal that is part of each new experience, each departure and arrival. It is a sign of the richness of diversity. The border defines our own home territory and provides us with the possibility of being a guest elsewhere. Crossing a border in a borderless space is a nonsense. Without the experience of crossing borders Europe would have been the poorer. Europe's richness is measured by its changing landscapes. They are places where one can belong in a given country even without knowing its language. They produce works of art which can only appear in places that welcome diversity: Italian architecture, for example, provides the setting for Greek Orthodox religion. They are the places that produce music derived from the merging of many traditions – German, Moravian, Magyar. These places inspire thoughts that can only come to mind through looking to the East in 'porta orientis'. Frontier landscapes have synagogues with Gothic-style arches and white pavilions set against frontier marine scenery. Frontier landscapes allow a man with an untrained ear to detect a foreign dialect in his own language and to experience several different nationalities on his life's journey before settling on his final one.

Europe has the borders it deserves. They are quite diverse – ranging from the transparent to the frontline. We will know the winners in due course. This question will be decided not at the borders, but in the societies that choose the borders that suit them best. If we wish to know what the borders of Europe will look like in the future, we need to examine the societies that are using them to establish their separate identities. Societies that are incapable of self-examination are unlikely to adapt themselves to the greater complexities of the new Europe.

BERLIN