

Eastern Europe: In Search of Form

Almost 75 years ago Czesław Miłosz wrote that what distinguishes Eastern European(s) is a specific, essential “lack of form – external and internal.” All their positive characteristics and virtues come from their fundamental vice which is a permanent immaturity. Eastern European(s) are guided by “a sudden inflow or outflow of internal chaos.”¹ This brilliant observation was articulated in a very specific historical moment, for very specific cultural purposes, and with a very clear aim in mind.² The historical-cultural reasons for Miłosz’s sober cultural-psychological

1) Czesław Miłosz, *Rodzinną Europą*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, 80.

2) The book was first published in 1959. And it was meant to be a kind of hermeneutic, poetic, and in a broad sense phenomenological, image of an Eastern European drawn for the Western reading public. Its aim was, then, not only to show the specific essence and *ethos* of Eastern Europe. It was also an apology and accusation, an act of recognition and an expression of disappointment. One of the outstanding characteristic features of that essay is that it applies, in a very delicate way, both components of these oppositions to both – Eastern and Europe.

diagnosis are all-too clear. Eastern Europe was (and still is largely), a cultural space saturated by history, and wrapped into sedimented layers of shared experiences, of conscious and unconscious, often conflicting, memories, of different cultural identities and models. They all indicate our common heritage – with both its cultural richness and its tragic fate(s). The question is to what extent Miłosz's words are still expressive of who we – Eastern Europeans – are today. Can we still recognize ourselves in them? Are our identities “determined” by a fundamental lack of form, external as well as internal? Whatever would be the answer to such questions – does it really matter to us?

The category of Eastern Europe – as I wrote elsewhere – is above all a historical category.³ It was created, by the West, as an evaluative label indicating a cultural region whose distinctive characteristics supposed to be economic, political, social inferiority, backwardness – in short, (semi-)barbarity; a cultural region too similar to be fully excluded, and too different and uncanny to be included. Hence, the paradoxical and rigid line of demarcation was conscientiously drawn (in fact, long before the infamous Iron Curtain was established), between two Europes: Western – the proper one; and Eastern – *as if* Europe. The latter was conceived as an *empty space* between empires. That is, a space which required rationalized cultivation and acculturation of the peoples inhabiting it. Those were obviously euphemisms for exploitation, deprivation of the peoples of their cultural identities, and, in radical cases, extermination. Such a construction of the category of Eastern Europe was in fact radically exclusive – its clear implication was the denial of the status of historical subjecthood of Eastern Europeans.⁴

3) See Przemysław Bursztyka, “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe: Toward a Common Ethos,” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 7, no. 3 (2023): 67–102. In that essay I present also an extensive, authorial conception of Eastern Europe. This program essay was meant as a first step toward positive reconceptualization of our cultural region. See also my editorial essay to the previous issue of the journal – Przemysław Bursztyka, “Eastern Europe: Cultural Construct or Way(s) of Living?” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 9, no. 1 (2025): 1–14.

4) See Hegel's comments on the Slavonic people in his *The Philosophy of History*. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, vol. 2, translated into Polish by Janusz Grabowski and Adam Landman, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958, especially 205–206.

Therefore, it is not surprising that there is some kind of indecision on how we should deal with the category in question. And there are different ideas and strategies what to do with it. Some theoreticians, thinkers, and prominent journalists claim that – and I believe their reasoning is based mainly on purely economic, and even as such oversimplified, argument – there is no longer any need to use that category. Also, it is difficult to overlook an increasing lack of interest in the topic itself – even in countries belonging to the region.⁵ Everything looks as if the category of Eastern Europe is a thing of the past. Furthermore, it is so since the cultural reality indicated by the category simply disappears. It is more and more difficult to speak about shared memories and experiences which would be constitutive for the Eastern European community; in whatever way we would like to understand it. I think such reasonings are based on, at least, a triple misrecognition regarding how history and culture operate as well as concerning topography be it imaginative, geopolitical, or geocultural.

First, it is, knowingly or not, based on one of the gravest myths of the late twentieth century, namely Fukuyama's concept of the end of history. In history there are no ends (be them happy or not), and history itself has no End. In history there are only continuities and discontinuities, durations and disruptions, moving forward and backward. It is between these poles that cultural communities make attempts at *in-forming*, *de-forming* and *re-forming* themselves. There are different sediments of historical time which grounds our experiences not only as singular, individualized events, or repetitive, but mundane, ones; there are also trans-generational experiences transcending the limitations of a particular historical period, or even an epoch.⁶ Only on that basis can we conceive of the immediate, spontaneous, univocal response to the barbarian-Russian, full-scale war against Ukraine, of all the countries which have been confronted for centuries (and not only during the postwar period), with Russian imperialism. Only these countries and peoples can and do experience this war *as if* it were their

5) Somehow emblematic is the fact that in the recent years in Poland there is a significant decrease in number of students interested in attending Eastern European Studies.

6) See for example Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, translated and edited by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.

own war. Also, only on that basis we can conceive of the sociopolitical dance, with all its twists and turns, between liberal democracy and illiberal “revolts” which seems to be so typical for Eastern Europe.⁷

Second, consequently, overreliance on simplified economic reasoning which detaches it from the broader cultural plane leads to misrecognition of other factors and motivations which are operative in culture. While thinking of culture from an archeological perspective – it appears as the realm of meanings which emerges out of the unconscious sphere of sedimented experiences, forgotten collective memories, repressed affects, and traumas. The more they are repressed, the bigger the risk of the eruptive return of the repressed. However, even without such an eruption, they still generate “from behind” many of our cultural experiences. In this

7) Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes explain the current rise of a semi-authoritarian, illiberal wave in Central and Eastern Europe by referring to the logic of mimetism. In the time of political transformation (starting from 1989) Central and Eastern European countries – such as Hungary and Poland – decided that the most efficient way to a better future was to follow one simple imperative: “Imitate the West!” And this decision has had far reaching and long-lasting consequences of, as the authors argue, psycho-political nature. This decision created a truly colonialist situation. “The goal pursued by postcommunist reformers was simple. They wished their countries to become ‘normal,’ which meant like the West. This involved importing liberal-democratic institutions, applying Western political and economic recipes, and publicly endorsing Western values. Imitation was widely understood to be the shortest pathway to freedom and prosperity.” However, “the imitator’s life inescapably produces feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity. Indeed, the futile struggle to create a truly credible copy of an idealized model involves a never-ending torment of self-criticism if not self-contempt. ... In this sense, imitation comes to feel like a loss of sovereignty.” (p. 118). Furthermore, Western liberal democracies for decades were for Eastern Europeans a bastion of normality – of freedom, prosperity, and even more importantly of traditional and religious values. The reality was/is that what Western liberal democracies conceive as normality certainly consists of the first two elements, but its stance on the axiological dimension departs quite significantly from images of Eastern European conservatives. A very good example here is the problem of nationalism: The typical for Western liberalism, distrust of nationalism (understandable, for example, in the context of Germany) was not something self-evident for the Polish political elites. Even more, a denial of national sentiments in this case would have caused a deep distrust in liberalism whatsoever. Interestingly, both attitudes are deeply embedded (though with different vectors), in the sedimented historical experiences. All these aspects plus some of the failures of Western liberalism in the global context (e.g., the economic crises of 2008), eventually led, in the minds of Eastern European conservatives, to a significant reversal of the colonialist situation – “Now, it is us who defend normality and values. It is us who are true Europeans. It is us who is the real model to be imitated.” Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July, 2018): 117–28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0049>.

sense *Eastern Europe exists and will exist as a specific constellation of experiences*, some of which are conscious while others remain in the dark zone of forgetfulness. This constellation determines specific responses to concrete situations, dominant attitudes to sociopolitical reality, and all the challenges it carries with itself. This can be visible as, for example, typical for Eastern Europeans, relative dominance of affectivity over reason.⁸ Certainly, one of the basic components of this constellation is a profound experience of fragility of one's own community – be it an ethnic, local, or national – and one's own cultural identity; an experience stemming from the centuries-long confrontation with the risk of non-existence. Obviously, there is a clear difference between the current geopolitical situation of Ukraine and Belarus on the one hand, and Poland and the Baltic states on the other. And yet, this sense of fragility of our communal worlds, which can be crushed by those-in-power, enters the stage as a reminder that the current state of affairs is not self-evident, given once and for all. What is striking in this regard is that Eastern Europe – for such a long time treated with suspicion and distrust – in the current geopolitical situation occupies a special place on the political and cultural map of the European community. It is this transgenerational experience of a possibility of non-existence along with the whole set of strategies as to how this radical possibility is to be dealt with (on micro- and macro-levels), which now can be somehow instructive for the whole European community.

Third, any claim foretelling the end/disappearance of Eastern Europe is marked by a significant misrecognition concerning cultural geography. Moreover, it puts aside some crucial processes and events taking place before our eyes. How can one speak about the vanishing of the category and reality of Eastern Europe when Ukraine constantly, for over ten years, has been paying the highest price for its courageous defense of its sovereignty, physical, and cultural existence; or when the Belarusian

8) It is certainly true. However, one can raise at least two legitimate objections here. First, the distinction between these two spheres of the human soul should not be seen in terms of (post-)Cartesian sharp opposition – rationality vs. irrationality. Affects are not simply these blind, dark movements of the human soul. They have their own cognitive structure, distinctive forms of evidence and as such they are disclosive of our intersubjective, interpersonal world. Second, in many cases they have a clear advantage over reason. To better realize that – it suffices to compare Polish and German reactions, in the first days and weeks of the Russian, full-scale war against Ukraine.

people are directly and increasingly endangered by the possibility of annihilation not only of their political sovereignty, but also of their cultural identity? In both cases all the processes of colonization, de-colonization, and re-colonization are at place. And paradoxically they come from both sides of this “empty space.” There is no doubt what side is taken (in both cases) by the collective West. However, under a closer look, what is striking here is a very significant indecision. The West politically recognizes the peoples and the states for the sake of its own security. The West is deeply agitated by the genocidal Russian invasion of Ukraine, but we can see how hesitant it is when it comes to any possible Ukrainian attacks on distant targets in Russia. Similarly, the West is highly supportive for and “solidary” with the Belarusian cause, and yet, it is difficult not to notice that in fact Belarus is still treated as an indisputable part of Russian cultural and, more strictly, political dominance. Is it not telling? Is it not yet another example of drawing arbitrary lines of demarcation and division? Is it not yet another example of a sophisticated act of inclusion-exclusion? I have mentioned the issue of recognition – but who and what exactly is being recognized here? The Belarusian people, Ukraine? Or perhaps – in a strange and twisted way – Russia?

This whole confusion stems from a more original one. That is, from this persistent fact that Eastern Europe has never been truly recognized, that is, never positively conceptualized. That is why it is notoriously unclear – what exactly it is, where it lies, what are its basic cultural (and geographical) coordinates.⁹ And that is why most Eastern Europeans would very willingly avoid this label as simply shameful and debasing. If being Eastern European means – either inhabiting an indeterminate nowhere or simply subordination to Russia, then it is not very difficult to understand such a resistance against the label. To somehow find a way out of this deadlock there were attempts to replace the category with another, rehabilitating one. “Perhaps the distinction between Central and Eastern Europe is not so insignificant after all. Central Europe is a claim to belonging. Eastern Europe is an act of exclusion. Eastern Europe is always an imaginary place, and it usually belongs to someone else.”¹⁰

9) For a concise overview of the demarcations and divisions of Europe, which certainly do not lead to a convincing delimitation of Eastern Europe see my “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe,” 76–79. The overview is followed by an attempt at an authorial positive reconceptualization of Eastern Europe.

10) Jacob Mikanowski, “Goodbye, Eastern Europe!” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 27, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/goodbye-eastern-europe/>. Accessed November 4, 2025.

This is a nice and elegant distinction, I admit. The only problem is that it simply overlooks two things: first, the very concept of Central Europe itself is as colonialist¹¹ as the one to be replaced. The only difference lies in the direction of cultural vectors. Second, much more importantly, it overlooks the fact that despite the colonialist origins of the very term “Eastern Europe” there is a positive historical-cultural reality behind the term. In other words, it overlooks that Eastern Europe is not only a colonialist category, but more importantly it can, and should be, seen as a *topographical* and *ethical* category.¹²

It was constituted throughout centuries as a particular *topos* or rather *topos* of different *topoi*. For a very long time this *topos* was characterized by essential *in-betweenness*; that is, a positive and creative situatedness between West and East. In this sense Eastern Europe was a cultural region where European values were exposed to Europe’s Other – Russia. Regardless of the adequacy or inadequacy of that image – it is no longer operative (for obvious reasons). However, it does not necessarily mean that nowadays the category of in-betweenness is devoid of any heuristic value. Eastern Europe has been a cultural region of: creative coexistence of different nations and ethnicities (including those which never created nation-states); of largely peaceful co-existence of three main monotheistic religions and numerous Christian denominations – most importantly of co-existence of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity; of a deliberative proto-democratic form of the political, and so forth. One can say, following a celebrated phrase by Milan Kundera (applied for the purposes of a different cultural geography), that Eastern Europe was constituted “according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space” as opposed to the demonic rule of the Russian empire: “the smallest variety within the greatest space.”¹³ In the course of the dramatic history of this region, this culturally pluralistic landscape was largely destroyed by both the external empires and ideologically driven nationalistic impulses of particular national/ethnic groups which often led to deadly clashes. It was fragmented and divided – not only in a political-geographical

11) For the cultural and strictly political origins of the category of Central Europe see Joseph Franz Maria Partsch, *Central Europe*, New York, 1903; Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1915.

12) For more on that see my “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe.”

13) Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” translated from French by Edmund White. *The New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984, 33.

sense, but also by a whole set of social operations which were meant to introduce and strengthen prejudices, distrust, and enmity. Thus, we, Eastern Europeans, inhabit spaces which carry testimonies of both the pluralistic, multicultural heritage of our region, and of all the tragedies which took place here. We live in spaces crossed in many ways and in many different directions by visible and invisible borders; spaces organized by many different, and often radically opposite, points of reference, different stories and histories, different narratives by means of which we try to make sense of who we are. Living in such spaces, we are condemned, so to speak, to a constant search for our form(s); even if and when such a search takes the form of an evasion like in the case of the so-called weak identification. There is no doubt while observing the current turbulences in the sociopolitical sphere in the countries of the region that this sometimes-dramatic quest for a form is permanently taking place. And yet, even if these fluctuations, these “dramatic inflows and outflows of internal chaos,” can very often be highly disturbing and embarrassing, they can be seen as signs of the unfinished, dynamic, pluralistic, and open-ended character of Eastern Europe.

Eastern Europe, as I have mentioned, is to be understood as an *ethical* category. That is, as a specific historically formed *ethos*. Regardless of all the differences between the peoples of the region, it seems that they are bound by the same *ethos*, the *ethos* whose fundament is the spirit of resistance against tyranny and oppression coming from without or from within. Thus, it is guided by the ideals of freedom, equality, plurality, and the sovereignty of the people. But the historical formation of that *ethos* was dramatic where the guiding ideals were often brutally undermined and violated. And that is why its essential component is a constantly renewed activity of self-questioning, as much as the persistent, stubborn will for self-determination. Given the dramatic history of the region – it should come as no surprise that the latter is treated by Eastern Europeans with a great amount of sensitivity and with an almost complete lack of irony (with some notable exceptions).

We are pleased to present a second issue of *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* devoted to Eastern Europe. While the previous issue was concerned with more general, structural topics, the current one concentrates on more specific and contemporary ones. The leading question of this issue is the question of our cultural identities – their forms, their elusive nature, their historical,

normative and axiological grounds, frameworks and limitations. The two issues, taken together, present an attempt at positive resemantization of the category of Eastern Europe. An attempt undertaken by a community of Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian philosophers cooperating within the frameworks of the European Centre for Philosophy of Culture (<https://filozofia.uw.edu.pl/europejskie-centrum-filozofii-kultury/>).

We start our Thematic Section with a highly inspiring essay by Tatiana Shchytsova who thoroughly analyzes the fundamental *topos* of both Belarus and Eastern Europe, namely in-betweenness. In her analysis Shchytsova begins with a critical comparison of Ignat Abdzirlovich's and Czesław Miłosz's conceptions of the cultural form constituted between West and East (to supplement it later with the insights of more contemporary thinker – Ihar Babkou). This situatedness has clear advantages and disadvantages for the formation of cultural identity. It allows to show Belarusian identity as a fluid, polyphonic, open project. However, in the contemporary political context this hermeneutics of in-betweenness encounters insurmountable limitations. The author very convincingly shows, following Kundera's distinctions, that the Belarusian cultural form constitutes itself in-between geo-political and geo-cultural planes, and as such it is dependent on the double recognition of its subjecthood. Shchytsova's essay is a must-read for everyone who wants to get a deeper insight into the complexities of the formation of the Belarusian *ethos* and national character. Let alone the fact that her analysis shows very well how complex, sophisticated, and painfully relevant is the logic of the Western colonialism when it comes to Eastern Europe.

The quest for identity is always already a kind of challenge that an individual or a community throw down to the sociopolitical reality. However, that relation is often reversed – that is, instead of a creative process of self-informing we are forced to accept ready-made, ideologically founded forms. That was the fate of Eastern Europeans under Soviet rule. Jurga Jonutytė in her fascinating essay analyzes an interesting form of resilience undertaken by many Lithuanians under the Soviet occupation – namely the weak identification. The latter is a form of narrative self-identification which does not concentrate on a story-teller, but on some other, largely unknown (or at least marginalized), person who is, in a sense, expressive of the specific conditions and vulnerabilities of his/her/their time. This form of replacement of the center of

one's own story liberates the process of narrative self-constitution from the interplay of political and cultural forces. It appears, then, to be a very efficient mode of undermining a particular political power by simply refusing to even enter into the field of a struggle for hegemony. The value of this mode of resilience goes far beyond the specificity of the communist regimes.

Culture can be seen, as I have mentioned, as a specific reservoir of unconscious motivations, affects, and dispositions which even though hidden can find their articulation in our responses to particular situations or our attitudes toward the sociopolitical reality. This perspective finds an interesting exemplification in the essay by Elvīra Šimfa. She presents very insightful and up-to-date analysis of Eastern European attitudes toward labor, which, even though opposite, in fact have originated out of the same space (that is, ideological frameworks of the Soviet regime), and are also effects of different strategies of coping with that reality. Šimfa situates her analysis in the cultural context of introducing AI into the labor market and shows how reactions to that fact are emblematic for the mentioned attitudes.

The process of creating a coherent social-cultural form is always confronted with many twists and turns, expected and unexpected difficulties. It can always fail or at least fall short of expectations. Marta Valdmāne in her very interesting essay shows how the process of building a cohesive and at the same time pluralistic Latvian society cannot be evaluated as fulfilled and successful. The level of identification with the nation and society among Latvians (let alone quite a numerous Russian minority), is far from being satisfactory. Valdmāne claims that this failure is grounded in the increasing discrepancy between values, gradually transformed into pure signs, and the actual human concerns. In her opinion, the Latvian experience is not something isolated and exceptional. Rather it is emblematic of the processes taking place (or to take place soon), in the whole of the European Union. It seems that the only promising way out of this cultural deadlock is redirecting our attention from abstract (in a double sense), society to community understood first as a genuine community of those “who lack community.”

Rasius Makselis, in turn, proposes thinking optimistically in these dark times. He presents a concise analysis of the Lithuanian experience of restoring freedom first as liberation from the oppressive totalitarian regime, and in the

next step as a positive project of a nation-state built upon a rule of law, social, and economic freedom. This project was built not on a narrow ethnic basis but, as if inspired by the rich historical experience of Lithuanians, on a legal one (with significant contribution by Jews, Poles, and Lithuanian Russians). Deeply embedded in history, it was future oriented. The author asks whether the example of the Lithuanian success can serve as a positive prognosis for the future in times when liberal democracies seem to be endangered (in all possible senses), by the growing aspirations of the autocrats.

Each community needs positive points of reference which can serve as basic existential and axiological coordinates. What distinguishes Eastern Europe, in this regard, are certainly solidarity revolutions – from the Polish Solidarity Movement, through the Singing Revolution in the Baltic states and the Ukrainian Maidans, to the Belarusian Revolution of 2020–21. All of them were spectacular examples of all-national, non-violent, radically inclusive projects of positive reconstruction of cultural reality. Their legacy is still virtually with us; it co-constitutes Eastern European *ethos* and as such it carries a potential for possible future attempts at such a reconstruction. My contribution to this issue is an extensive phenomenological analysis of solidarity understood as a complex social phenomenon.

The section Forum consists of three inspiring contributions. James Anderson proposes an interesting interpretation of anarchist-socialist praxis as based on an actualization of human nature. Following Chomsky and Bookchin he argues that human embodied nature is not only the condition of possibility for human creativity, but it also guarantees and safeguards just and free society. David Bardnaba-Plou thoroughly analyzes the question of artistic value of gastronomic productions. In contrast to traditional views, he defends the thesis that food can be seen as “artistic medium not necessarily on the same level as architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, or music, but as a unique form of art with its own distinct characteristics.” Jan Defrančeski, in turn, undertakes a complex and very insightful interpretation of Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion by using the second-person perspective. In Defrančeski’s view it is through this perspective that we can not only fully grasp the meaning of Schopenhauer’s ethics but also learn how to implement it.

The third section of this issue consists of the intriguing paper by Estelle Clements who reflects on whether in the revolutionary age of increasing digitalization and virtu-

alization of reality we are not witnesses of a historical change of religious-axiological frameworks within which we live and act. This would be comparable to the shift from paganism to Christianity in the late antiquity. In other words: will Christianity be able to maintain its status of a spiritual fundament of our culture? Or will it be replaced by some other spiritual system? I believe those are open questions. And not necessarily new ones.



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