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The Western Imaginary and the Imagined Strategies against it in the New European Countries and the Margins of Eastern Europeⁱ

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Abstract

The following paper discusses how the Western imaginary or the way “the West looks East” reinforces the construction of “unstable” or ambivalent identities in the new European countries, as well as the margins of Eastern Europe. Particularly, it deals with the Western discourses that locate Eastern Europe and its margins in the ambivalent state of spatiotemporal transitionality, and explores the possible defense strategies of the latter. The abovementioned Western discourses are roughly divided by the author in the stigmatizing and enlightening ones though both imply a certain type of stigmatization. The “othering” (Todorova 1997) and “asymmetrical” (Melegh 2006) discourses are considered as the examples of the stigmatizing discourse, while “civilizational” discourse (Elias 1994), which is translated into the “elitist” discourse within the local settings, is considered as an example of the enlightening discourse. Furthermore, two extreme ways of “symbolic escape” by the new European countries (the cases of Poland and Romania) and the margins of Eastern Europe (the case of Georgia) are discussed: “a radical emigration... [alongside] cultural amnesia” and a “passionate nationalism and hyperbolic pride” (Kiossev 2002). Finally, the question is posed whether these strategies can help avoid stigmatization. Based on both the researches by other scholars and the recent cross-cultural research conducted among the youth in Romania, Poland and Georgia by the author of this paper, it is illustrated that such means of “symbolic escape” can cause further stigmatization and be largely responsible for a kind of “failure discourse” characteristic to the representatives of the abovementioned new European countries and the margins of Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, discourse, stigmatization, nationalism.

Introduction

The following paper is a part of my cross-cultural research on the perception of Westernization and particularly EU-ropeanization among the youth from the new European countries (the cases of Romania and Poland) and the margins of Eastern Europe (the case of Georgia). Based on the youth perceptions,¹¹ I aim to illustrate how the EU-ropeanization discourses provoke a new politics of ambivalence responsible for upholding ambivalent identities that constantly negotiate between the EU-ropeanizing forces and the national. In order to make sense of why and how these ambivalent or “unstable” (Bjelic 2002, 15) identities are constructed, it is necessary to get familiar with the “Western Imaginary” (Melegh 2006, 31) and the way “the West looks East” (Goldsworthy 2002, 35) as the latter does encourage particular discourses and respective responses to/strategies against them in the new European countries and the margins of Eastern Europe.

The Stigmatizing Discourses and the Strategies against Them

Thus, what are the Western European discourses about the new European countries and the margins of Europe? Citing just one of the famous examples that is the already classical work by Maria Todorova, most of the scholars researching recent developments in the Eastern European countries agree that the West invents the “Eastern other” as its “opposite” and through this discourse the West “essentializes” the Eastern identity (Todorova 1997). Different narratives can be applied to back this “essentialization” up and the Western “inventors” are especially concerned by being tactful in this regard, therefore, these days the most widespread narratives would probably be the one on “the idea of an ongoing transition... to an ideal social form [though] postponed into the indefinite or localized out of the reach of the ‘locals’” (Melegh 2006, 20), or the “philanthropic idea” of supporting the upward movement in the name of civilization (Elias 1994). One could think of other types of narratives or even sub-narratives though it’s not the purpose of this paper to discuss them but to show their impact on the construction of the locals’ perceptions of the Westernizing/EU-ropeanizing forces. Therefore, I will try to unite these narratives in some wider categories roughly dividing them in the following two groups: The stigmatizing discourses and the enlightening discourses (though both imply a certain type of stigmatization).

Under the stigmatizing discourses I imply those that voluntarily or involuntarily result in a negative labeling of the representatives of the Eastern and Central European countries, or those located even farther on the

periphery. One of the examples of the stigmatizing discourses is the abovementioned “othering” discourse, which views the societies in the light of a descending civilizational scale and emphasizes the difference between the so called “new” or “emerging” European countries (those on the margins, like Georgia, are not even worth consideration) and “real,” “old” Europe. Another example of the stigmatizing discourse is the “asymmetrical” discourse, including the one of Europeanization, which is

“asymmetrical enough to silence all those somehow denied membership of that ‘universally valid’ community... This asymmetry alone and the emerging binary oppositions are powerful enough to deny a ‘real existence’ to those who are in a midway or bottom position on such a scale” (Melegh 2006, 30).

What are the strategic responses of the victims of the stigmatizing discourses that is how do they try to “respond to these vicious games of inclusion and exclusion”? (Bideleux 2002, 35). Concerning the “othering” discourse, Todorova presented a comprehensive analysis of projecting the stigma and the accompanying frustrations on those located farther to the East and, as a result, Orientalizing them, while simultaneously Occidentalizing oneself as the West of the “other” (Todorova 1997). A wonderful example of such a response is presented in the publication by the Federal Trust entitled “The EU and Romania – Accession and Beyond” (2006). In the chapter on “Romania and the Future of the European Union” the author talks how important Romania as a political agent is to the EU because of its “cultural and geopolitical belonging” to Central Europe, and because of its neighbourhood with both Eastern Europe consisting of Ukraine, Moldova and Russia, and “South-Eastern Europe (the Balkans), where Romania has a tradition of intense contacts unburdened by hatred and conflict” (Severin 2006, 109). In addition, Romania is presented as a real supporter of “Turkey’s accession to the EU, as well as that of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and of the Western Balkan countries” (ibid, 107). Thus, here is an attempt to push the borders of Eastern Europe farther to the East and to exclude oneself from both Eastern Europe and the Balkan region.ⁱⁱⁱ We can also see an attempt to present oneself as a peaceful country, “unburdened by [ethnic] hatred and conflict,” and ultimately, more civilized than the Balkans; finally, not yet being a member of the EU itself (as the book is published in 2006), Romania is nevertheless considered as such an “important political agent” within the EU that it already promotes other less important agents’ (located farther East and South-East) incorporation in it.

The “asymmetrical” discourse provokes its own strategic response as well. As the main danger connected to it is “to silence all those somehow denied membership of that ‘universally valid’ community” (which is represented by Europe), the ones “in a midway or bottom position” desperately strive to gain the European status and to prove that they are

genuine European societies. “On a ‘sliding scale of merit’ no one should want to be out of ‘Europe’ and social and value patterns it represents or, more precisely, is aligned with” (Melegh 2006, 30). Therefore, Romanians need to constantly reiterate: “We are Europeans” or “We are a part of Europe” (Boari and Gherghina 2009, 13); Poles emphasize their “national uniqueness [that] reinforces Poland’s attractiveness vis-à-vis the European Union” even in their parliamentary speeches (Krzyzanowski 2009, 104); while Georgians, whose European status is rather questionable, need to persuade both themselves and the outsiders: “I am a Georgian, therefore I am a European!”^{iv}

However, in order to sound more trustworthy, they have to persuade the powerful European players that the latter are in need of the Eastern, Central, South-Eastern or more peripheral regions on the margins of Europe. One of the vivid examples can be found in the same paper by Severin having the following conclusion: “Romania needs the EU as much as the EU needs Romania” (ibid, 111), and alongside the trivial idea that “what is good for Europe is also good for Romania,” presenting the new truth that “what is good for Romania is good for Europe” (ibid, 112). A similar case from the Polish reality can be found in the Polish politicians’ discourses on “Polish national mission in the EU” before joining it. This mission is perceived as essential for the EU itself and the politicians argue about Poland’s “preferential treatment” by the EU implying that

“due to its exceptional mission and national uniqueness, Poland must be treated by the EU in some special, less demanding way... differently than, say, other EU candidate countries” (Krzyzanowski 2009, 110).

A corresponding example can be brought from the Georgian reality represented by the discourse on Georgia’s strategic importance for Europe as a potential energy supplier with the pipelines stretching across the country, providing Europe with the gas from the East and competing with the Russian monopoly over gas. Europe is often pitied for having to play by Russian rules in order to survive cold winters, and the alternative energy projects, in which Georgia is considered to be a “corridor” for supplying Europe, are ascribed a missionary value.

The Enlightening Discourses and the Strategies against Them

Besides the stigmatizing discourses, or rather alongside them, there are quite powerful enlightening discourses, which I would call the euphemistic forms of stigmatization. The enlightening discourses aim to “enlighten” the

new European or not-quite European societies and to transform them into “real” democracies of “true” Europe. One of the examples of the enlightening discourse is the “civilizational” discourse, which implies that Europe (or more precisely, the EU) has a cultural mission of cultivating “true European values” among those to be transformed into “real” democracies. Consequently, the EU accession and the accompanying EU-ropeanization process is considered as “the most authentic form of modernization” (Melegh 2006, 118). It turns out that usually the main supporters of this discourse are the local intellectual and elite groups, who may “continuously argue that ‘Europe’ brings ‘tolerance’ and ‘rationality’ into our not truly ‘European’ country” (ibid, 114) and may constantly complain about their country’s inability to properly encompass and enact European values and modes of life, starting from the distorted forms of individualization, ending with the poor quality of toilets on Hungarian trains. Thus, the “civilizational” discourse is translated into the “elitist” discourse within the local settings. The scholars researching this topic bring various examples of the local intellectuals’ call for abandoning “irrational” or “unworthy” local customs and for “the rejection of ‘Eastern’ local nationalism” (Melegh 2006, 115) drawing a clear line “between the image of the ‘national’ as past and ‘old’ and the ‘European’ as ‘future’ and ‘new’” (Krzyzanowski 2009, 107). Furthermore, EU-ropeanization is considered by them as the only means of overcoming the “backwardness” of their population. Some authors go even further and state that “from time to time the local intelligentsia openly called for the help of the West – in their wording – ‘to colonize’ the local population” (Melegh 2006, 115).

Thus, certain perceptions are constructed, spread and backed up through the abovementioned discourse, particularly those that the locals have various “unworthy” customs, which should be abandoned in the name of civilization; that the locals are usually “backward,” therefore, unable to promote desirable developments in their society and are in need of someone from the outside to teach them; and that the locals need to reject their local nationalism, which no doubt is “Eastern” (whatever meaning it has), and should move to the post-nationalist state in order to catch up with “true” Europeans as the Western European countries are in the post-nationalist era (Bideleux 1996).

The possible strategies of defense from the both stigmatizing and enlightening discourses are sensibly summarized in Kiossev’s paper under the subtitle of “the dominant strategies of (dis)identification.” He describes two ways of “symbolic escape” representing two extremes: The first strategy is “a radical emigration... [alongside] cultural amnesia” (Kiossev 2002, 182) and the second one is a “passionate nationalism and hyperbolic pride” (ibid, 183).

To start from the first strategy, it’s not a secret that lots of people from the Eastern part of Europe migrate to its Western part, especially after their

countries' joining the EU as crossing the borders has become much easier, while Western Europe provides more job opportunities and pays better. Poles talk a lot about their compatriots' vast migration to England and Germany; Romanians produce the same narratives about their compatriots' massive migration to Italy and Spain... But they also talk with a sad smile or an ironic tone how the Poles desperately try to adopt the British accent after a few months' stay in Britain; moreover, how they try to even speak Polish with the British accent! Romanians confess with the same sad smile or the same ironic tone that while staying abroad they try to hide their nationality; moreover, that sometimes they pretend to be Italians! (From the author's in-depth interviews with the Polish and Romanian youth).

I guess these desperate attempts can be viewed as a defense strategy against the Westerners' discourses on how after joining the EU several hundred thousand Eastern Europeans are on their way to "invade" Western Europe, which is well evidenced by a caricature from one of the British newspapers depicting a long line of trucks with the signs: Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, etc. and a large poster on the borderline saying: "Welcome to London, equal crime opportunities for all!" (Mautner 2008, 39). This is one of the numerous examples of the Eastern Europeans' representation in the Western discourses as the criminals responsible for most of the recent ills occurring in the peaceful and democratic societies of Western Europe. But can imitating the British accent or pretending to be an Italian help avoid stigmatization? I would say it causes double stigmatization (from both one's compatriots and the citizens of a recipient country) and its accompanying "failure discourse" characteristic to both Romanians and Poles (and probably other "Easterners" as well).

The second type of "symbolic escape" is considered to be a "passionate nationalism and hyperbolic pride." As illustrated above, it is assessed as a purely "Eastern" phenomenon as the scholars have a general agreement on the fact that the Western European countries have long stepped into the post-nationalist era (though no doubt one could find the examples of nationalist discourses all around Western Europe). And even if there are expressions of nationalism in Western Europe, they are still more acceptable than the similar phenomena in Eastern Europe viewed through the dichotomy of "civic" (or "Western") and "ethnic" (or "Eastern") nationalisms, the former "characterized as liberal, voluntarist, universalist, and inclusive," while the latter "glossed as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist, and exclusive" (Brubaker 2004, 133).

The expressions of "passionate nationalism" and the "hyperbolic pride" intertwined with it can be found in different kinds of "identity concerns." A. P. Iliescu describes them on the example of Romanians and states that such "an identity obsession... frequently prevails in Romania" (Iliescu 2009, 96) and is represented by such traits as "focus upon 'glorious' past

events,” “the tendency to overrate (national or ethnic) particularities [that] leads to encapsulation of ‘Romanianism’ in a certain distinguishing feature,” the emphasis on “being special” and “different from others,” “a tendency towards self-celebration,” as well as “identity fear... that one’s identity could be affected (forgotten, altered, modified, etc.) by what is going on around (on the continent, in the whole world, etc.)” exemplified by Romanians’ complaints about the attempts of ethnic Romanians’ “Hungarization” in Transylvania or “Russification” in Eastern Moldavia (ibid, 97-99).

To console Romanians, I would say that the very similar “identity obsession” can be traced among Georgians. The “focus upon ‘glorious’ past events” is the most common feast narrative in Georgia; “the tendency to overrate (national or ethnic) particularities” exemplified by the narratives that Georgians have a unique alphabet that creates its own language group, that Georgian polyphony is one of the most ear-pleasing, that Georgians are one of the most hospitable nations, or that Georgian food and wine are one of the best in the world, does present “Georgianness” as a distinguishing characteristic; the emphasis on “being special” and “different from others” is not alien to Georgians as well and there is even a popular saying: “All of us, who are the best, are Georgians.”^v And although this popular expression is perceived in a humorous way, the one on “Georgia as a Mother of God’s land” is the dominant religious, as well as mundane, discourse of the country. The abovementioned narratives on Georgia’s victorious past, Georgia as the first Orthodox Christian country being under the special protection of God’s Mother, Georgians’ famous hospitality and marvelous food and wine, etc. provides a fertile ground for special pride and “self-celebration.” Finally, Georgians have the same “identity fear” that their “national spirit” can be endangered by the ongoing rapid socio-cultural transformations, by the globalizing forces, by various religious sects and denominations coming to the country and threatening the Georgian Orthodox beliefs, etc. But the two most alarming threats are represented, on the one hand, by the powerful northern neighbor (Russia) that has been trying to subordinate Georgia for two centuries and, on the other hand, by certain westernizing forces that, despite stimulating some positive innovations, might be harmful to the local traditions.

Poles would probably echo this discourse in a somewhat modest way. Analyzing Polish political discourse since 1989, Krzyzanowski observes that it is characterized by

“the topos of national uniqueness, frequently paired with the topos of definition of the national role [that] appears to have the main role... the topos of national history is invoked to support the said uniqueness of Poland and portray Polish collectivity as exceptionally experienced throughout its history, and, therefore,

as able to substantially contribute to the creation of the new Europe and its identity” (Krzyzanowski 2009, 103-104).

In addition, “identity fear... that one’s identity could be affected... by what is going on around,” even if it relates to the EU influences (nothing to say about the Russian factor), is not alien to Poles either. To return to the Polish political discourse in the recent period, it seems to underline that

“Poland must remain conscious of the non-ideal character of the EU as the object of collective aspirations and motivations: it emphasizes that Poland must always remain watchful of its national interests irrespective of the developments within the EU” (ibid, 105).

The author of this paper has also revealed the expressions of “passionate nationalism” in the in-depth interviews with the youth from the new European countries though both Romanian and Polish youngsters believe they lack national sentiments. They think it is especially visible now, when “a very strong idea of the united Europe has been promoted” and many young people consider their identities as European rather than just Romanian or Polish, which can shadow the feeling of national. As Anita (aged 19) has put it: “I still feel that I am Polish but some people just forget about that and they want to be European; they try to be European and forget about their roots”; or to quote Alina (aged 24):

“I think we [Romanians] somehow lose our identity. It is bad for the country. We have to be more nationalistic... I think we should be prouder of our culture, our values. We start to forget about these things and to adopt the Western or, as we say, European ones.”

However, there are some respondents, who state that after their country joined the EU, they have become more nationalistic:

“After joining the EU I have become more nationalistic than I was before. When you feel that you are a perfect market for the developed countries to sell their products and, in addition, they make you believe that it is only you who benefit from them, that before you were not civilized, and that you are a true European now, it’s hard not to become a nationalist” (Andrea, aged 23).

Another respondent sharing the very same concern calls it “European hypocrisy” suggesting everyone to be aware of it “for our own good” (Lucian, aged 20). Concerning Georgian youth, despite the fact that they consider themselves as quite nationalistic, they still state that “the epoch of being pro-Georgian hasn’t started by now” (Anano, aged 19), calling their peers for action to “protect our deeply cultural from the outside attempts to demolish it” (Giorgi, aged 18) and to preserve the “national spirit.”

Can a “passionate nationalism” be an effective means of escaping stigmatization? Quite contrary, it evokes further stigmatization being viewed by the post-nationalist West as an expression of chauvinism, racism, and xenophobia, and usually results in various kinds of “external conditionality” supported by “a strong bargaining position” of Western Europe (Schwellnus 2005, 52). For instance, it can be represented by the sanctions of different severity for the already acquired EU members or by a warning for the countries hoping to ever be incorporated in the EU structures that their integration will be postponed to the even more indefinite future.

Conclusion

In the presented paper I have attempted to reveal the impact of Western imaginary on the perception of EU-ropeanization in the new European countries and the margins of Eastern Europe. I have discussed the so called stigmatizing and enlightening discourses produced by the Westerners, as well as the Easterners’ imagined defense strategies against them that represent the ways of “symbolic escape.” I have tried to illustrate how the Western discourses support Eastern Europeans’ multiple stigmatizations and uphold ambivalent or “unstable” identities that constantly negotiate between the EU-ropeanizing forces and the national.

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ⁱⁱI have conducted a qualitative social research (June 2010-December 2011), namely, in-depth interviews and focus groups with the youth in Georgia, Romania and Poland: 50 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups in the capital of Georgia – Tbilisi, 33 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups in the capital of Romania - Bucharest and one of the main cities of Transylvania - Cluj-Napoca, and 14 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups in Krakow as the old capital and one of the most international cities in Poland.

ⁱⁱⁱJust to compare this vision of Romania’s location with the one in Encyclopedia Britannica, here is the definition from the latter: Romania is a “country lying in the eastern half of the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/508461/Romania>

^{iv}A popular expression by a former Prime Minister Zurab Jvania.

^v In Georgian: რაც კარგები ვართ, ქართველები ვართ (rackargebivart, qartvelebivart).

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