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WHAT IS  
EUROPEAN  
IDENTITY?



Europe is the only continent that has spent most of the modern age developing and contemplating theories about itself.

There are several reasons for this. First, in addition to all other contradictions, Europe also contradicts the notion of *terra continens* - that is, a large and continuous mass of land completely surrounded by water. Europe is surrounded by sea on three sides, while on the fourth there is a controversial land border with Asia. The most frequently quoted one follows the Ural Mountains, the Ural River, the Manic Plain, the Black Sea and Constantinople Straits. The "continent", together with adjacent islands covers 10,531,000 square kilometers (about 8% of the globe's surface). It is home to 728 million people (13% of humankind) dispersed throughout 44 sovereign countries. The data are impressive but too vague for a clear and far-reaching conclusion.

Those who hailed the second "Springtime of the People" (1989-1990) from the Baltic to the Adriatic did it with the slogan: "Back to Europe." They had a very clear picture of what Europe was in their mind. However, that image has, in the meantime, become murky. The eastern political border of Europe has remained even more controversial.

Ever since the Russian Federation became a member of the Council of Europe, Europeans have been asking: "What is Europe?" The Council of Europe's answer obviously is: "From the Azores to the Kurils." Inasmuch as this may appear to be an exaggeration to an ordinary European, it is not debatable from the point of view of the OSCE and American global strategy. Thus, one cannot blame Strobe Talbott, the American Deputy Secretary of State when, in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (May 26, 1997) entitled "Our Common Task", while advocating Turkey's admission to the European Union, he claimed: "Ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey has

been a part of the European system.” Or (*ibid.*): “Secretary of State, M. Albright... will use her term in office to encourage Europe to define itself in a most inclusive, comprehensive, and spacious way.” Within this scope one should also consider what was recently reported in the *Financial Times*. The Prime Minister of Kirghizstan, a land at the eastern end of Central Asia that borders China, declared: “We are dreaming about becoming a part of Europe.”

Such statements may sound bizarre, but they should not come as a surprise. They are legitimate within any context of European integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a more bizarre way, some member-states of the European Union, have usurped the name of the entire “continent”, such that distinction between countries is made by saying, for example, “in France and in Europe”, or “in Germany and in Europe”, etc. Similarly, some Central European countries, such as Croatia and Hungary “want to join Europe”, not just Asian or mainly Asian countries such as Turkey or Kirghizstan. These bizarre features of the political language force us to ask ourselves: “What is really Europe?”

This question that focuses on establishing the *quidditas* (“whatness”) of Europe calls for a definition. A vague answer would not suffice as *omnis definitio determinatio est*, every definition is determination. An answer, obviously, cannot be found by looking for controversial geographic borders of the “continent”. Searching for it in the realm of geopolitics or geo-strategic projects would also be futile. Hence, I strongly believe that a cultural and historical examination of Europe's identity would be fruitful.

The “continent” was named after Europa, a mythical daughter of the Phoenician King Agenor. Zeus, who abducted Europa, assumed the form of a white bull and took her to Crete. The silver coin of the future common European currency, which one can see broadcasted on German Television, is a contemporary memory of the Greek myth. The reverse side of the coin bears the name of the currency - “Euro” - while the top side shows the figure of a bull.

This old, classical myth has engendered new, modern ones. Some of them have been subject to damaging criticism by historians and philosophers of history. Arnold Toynbee maintains that “Europe is an inconceivable field of research”. “Europe” is, according to him, “a cultural misuse of a nautical concept”. He does not see Europe as a cultural and historical whole, and favours the scheme proposed by Oskar Halecki that outlines so-called European history as follows: 1. The Mediterranean Period (until 950

A.D.); 2. The European Period (950 through to 1950); and 3. The Atlantic Period (after 1950). Advocates of this theory may add nowadays: The Global Period (after 1989).

Such critical assessments are not unfounded. If we pose questions concerning space, time, and active agents – that are fundamental questions in any historical study – each of these questions leads to a dilemma in the case of European history. First, the very name of Europe may have been a frequently used synonym for the “Christian World” among scholars ever since Charles Martel's victory over the Arabs at Poitiers in 732. Further, it was generally accepted only after the French Revolution (1789). Second, in terms of space, as noted when the geographic concept is examined, Europe's eastern border still seems rather poorly defined. Third, with regard to time, our feeling in general opposes the boundaries set up by Halecki, or any such boundaries at all. Fourth, the active agents, synchronistic or diachronistic, are unstable and varied. They include the empire builders to the “crumbs of history”, from weak nations that died out to the long-lived and tenacious ones.

However, inasmuch as we should respect theoretical criticism, we must not forget that one of the foundations of our civilization, a permanent struggle for form, is *mythos*. During the course of history, *myth* engendered *logos*. Any offspring, even the scientific logos, bears the marks of its ancestor. Moreover, every Westerner with just a little bit of true concentration will easily discover in his or her personal life an equal presence of *mythos* and *logos*, if not a preponderance of the former. Thus, in spite of desperate attempts by the hypercritical philosophy of history, which sees Europe only as a “battlefield”, the practical *logos* will easily establish that Europe is not just a “regulative idea”, but a cultural-historical entity, the *quidditas* of which could be quite precisely defined.

Two hundred years ago, one of the founders of German literary Romanticism, Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known under his pen name of Novalis, entitled one of his essays “Christenheit oder Europa” (“Christianity or Europe” 1799). At that time, such a title was not questioned. How do we react today, after two centuries of secularism, to Novalis's title?

How many people in the today's world, including Croatia, think of Christianity whenever Europe is mentioned? However, as such “notions without perception” (*Begriffe ohne Anschauungen*) are empty, scholarship cannot neglect that fundamental cultural and historical fact. In contrast to politics, it wants to “see” the *quidditas*, the

identity of Europe. Moreover, it sees it through the essential determinants that constitute Europe as a particular cultural-historical entity, or as a “continent”. These determinants are:

- Classical heritage - primarily Greek philosophy and Roman law, as well as the Greek and Latin languages;
- Christianity - at first Catholicism, later Catholicism and Protestantism in the West, Orthodoxy in the East;
- European languages - the three branches of the Indo-European language family: Romance, Germanic, and Slavic;
- Universities - the establishment of autonomous places of teaching and research at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century;
- Dualism of spiritual and secular power;
- Social pluralism;
- Representative bodies;
- Individualism;
- Enlightenment;
- The National State;
- The rule of the law;
- Specific stylistic formations. In the arts, European expression has been deeply influenced by the classical heritage. It was not difficult to see a constant battle between the two classical super-styles: *Atticism* and *Asianism*, in modern terms, between Classicism and Mannerism. Results of that struggle have been embodied by a sequence of stylistic periods bearing such names as the Romanesque, the Gothic, the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo, Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, and other less important “isms”.

Taking into consideration the concentration of these determinants, the cultural-historical landscape of Europe reveals three clearly defined macro-regions: Western, Central, and Eastern Europe.

- *Western Europe*. For all of those who “want to join Europe today” (either as individuals from Africa, Asia, or Central and Eastern Europe or as designers of a political future in their countries) Western Europe is the “True Europe”. It stretches from the Atlantic to the eastern provinces of Germany. Mummified Western Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant) and the secular values that stem from that Christianity characterize it. Moreover, they presently function as value elements in a contemporary democracy.
- *Central Europe*. The name bears a heavy political and historical burden. It was first coined by Friedrich Naumann

in his book *Mitteleuropa* (1915), written within a framework of greater-German goals during the First World War. The “Habsburg myth” and the literary utopias of Joseph Roth followed it between the two World Wars. From the Second World War until the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, Russian imperialism, by suppressing the cultural and historical identity of the region made any European integration impossible. During that period, the East kept silent about Central Europe. In the West, and especially where German was spoken, one usually spoke of an East Central Europe (*Ostmitteleuropa*), about a Middle Europe (*Zentraleuropa*), about an In-Between Europe (*Zwischeneuropa*), or about the Danubian Region (*Donauraum*). Both sides sought to avoid unpleasant political reminiscences.

Central Europe is characterized by great political atomization, the late arrival of nation states, and a thriving Western Christianity. The considerable cultural contribution of non Indo-European peoples such as the Hungarians and Jews should also be recalled.

The borders of Central Europe, in particular in the West, have been hotly debated in the research literature. Most recently, a consensus that Central Europe includes the eastern provinces of Germany, Austria, and Northern Italy at the western end was reached. As far as the eastern borders are concerned, there is almost a unanimous scholarly agreement. Historians, political scientists, and political leaders of the region agree that the eastern borders of Central Europe coincide with the eastern borders of the former Christian West. The cultural and historical border follows, from North to South, the eastern borders of Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, which then crosses Western Belorussia, and then the Ukraine, separating its western Greek Catholic areas from the eastern, Orthodox ones. It subsequently meanders through Romania separating Catholic Transylvania from the rest of Romania which is Orthodox, then cuts through Voivodina to the eastern border of Croatia, crosses into Bosnia and Herzegovina where it separates Croatian from Serbian and Bosnian communities, and ends at the shore of the Adriatic. Considering the cultural and historical characteristics of the region, one could say that Central Europe is a Western, Petrian, Europe thwarted in its development.

- *Eastern Europe*. This region includes the area between the eastern border of Central Europe and the land border of the European “continent”. This area has been strongly influenced by Byzantinism and Islam. Typical cultural and historical features of the “true” Europe - classical

tradition, Latin language, and social pluralism can only be found in small traces. Collectivism prevails instead of individualism. With regard to art, there is also an absence of some historical styles such as the Romanesque, the Gothic, the Renaissance, and the Baroque in this region.

The three European macro-regions have their North and South, their Protestantism and Catholicism, or their Orthodoxy and Islam. They are all integral parts of Europe.

The combination of these fundamental features clearly and eloquently defines Europe as a specific cultural and historical entity, i.e., as a complex, precisely defined system of differences. This should serve as a warning to the architects of the new Europe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to expect success only if they stand up for this system of differences. Charles de Gaulle proposed this in an almost forgotten project entitled “Europe of Nations”. Otherwise, under the “terror of economy” they may not create a Europe, but something completely different that would be fatal to European identity.