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Eastern Partnership as Culture Project

It took Europeans many years to understand that the process of building continental federation can not be based only on “coal and steel community”. There would not be such deep crisis of multicultural society, such helplessness against conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and surely successors of the French Revolution and twentieth century totalitarian regimes would not have such problems with their identity and sense of community, if the European Union, from the very beginning, had been understood as a project, also as a culture project.

Treating culture as exclusive domain of national states and marginalization of culture through its exclusion from European dimension originated from fears and weaknesses caused by collapse of civilization after two world wars, as well as from nationalism, still present in the old continent, making it impossible to create developmental strategy extending beyond mutual economic, and later on also political interests. In the fifties Juliusz Mieroszewski (*columnist of journal Kultura, pseudonym Londoner*) while planning his “committee for the defense of remains of European continent”, when the European Community of Steel and Coal was still a project, cautioned that: *“if the European nations (...) will not change their old fashioned views and will not take on the only proper and modern way of thinking: EUROPE ABOVE ALL! - we should anticipate catastrophe (...) Politicians from smaller and larger states (...) being ignorant become the traitors of Europe. As we have only two options: federalized or satellite Europe.”*

With the passing time Mieroszewski’s words became even more current. Also in “satellite”, still „not–federalized” the East of Europe. Is it possible that the Eastern Partnership, the new instrument of the European Neighborhood Policy, being created before our own very eyes, will avoid mistakes of the European Union? Or would it be better to rephrase this question: Can we, citizens of states that only recently threw off the shackles of socialist friendship alliance, afford to

overcome historical resentments and weakness resulting from inferiority complex of development retardation and too short or disrupted tradition of self-determination, in order to build the Eastern Partnership from the start also as a common culture project?

The citizens of states from the other side of the Berlin Wall should be the addressees of only slightly reformulated question: Can Europe today afford to implement neighborhood partnership policy which would not marginalize culture by making it only the domain of nation states without finding a place for it in long-term neighborhood partnership strategy? As a side note, let me say that the “culture project” we are writing about here does not question the importance of national culture and responsibility of the state for it, however it questions looking at culture exclusively in that context and depriving it that way of ability to fulfill its potential at supra-national level, especially in European dimension we discuss here.

Why should the Eastern Partnership be also, and from its very beginning, a culture project? It is not easy in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan to repeat after Mieroszewski: „*EUROPE ABOVE ALL!*”. We want, like *Londoner*, hear these words also in Russia, and also - what he at the time did not expect – in Turkey. It is obvious that these words can be legitimized by political project and economic cooperation. Another obvious fact is that without referring to cultural heritage and also without creating new cultural tradition, these words will lack authenticity and ability to come true. If the text of the Czech Republic Presidency of 29 April 2009 applies to all 27 Member States of the European Union and states involved in the Eastern Partnership, including Southern Caucasus, referring to them as “European states”, it is very bold and for many people controversial expression of important political strategy. All the more unforgivable omission would be to leave out in this strategy the aspect of culture. For it is undeniable fact, that in historical dimension, as well as in the dimension of current civilizational ambitions, all states participating in the Eastern Partnership are part of European culture. In the article published at Minister of Foreign Affairs Homepage titled “*The Eastern Partnership in the European Union as the key to relations with Russia*” Radosław Sikorski emphasizes that “*new eastern neighbors of the EU belong to Europe not only in geographical sense, but also due to the fact that their citizens regard themselves as Europeans because of common experiences and culture, not to mention their mostly Christian roots.*”

During the Prague Summit certain controversies appeared, which in the future may stop or hinder the implementation of the Eastern Partnership. Georgia and Azerbaijan failed to include clause stating that 33 participants of the Summit should respect “*territorial integrity*” of other members of the Partnership. Whereas, referring to recognition of the independence of South Ossetia

and Abkhazia by Belarus, participants brought up the issue of not respecting rules and standards of international law. We found out that Russia is not pleased with such partnership, and that 42% of Ukrainians want integration with Russia, while only 34% support integration with the European Union. These and other facts are only symptoms of more serious difficulties, frozen conflicts and controversies, often originating in the past, that the Eastern Partnership has to deal with. We got used to the fact that these issues are dealt with only so called “hard” methods. But that is a dangerous habit. From what has happened in Israeli-Palestinian or Yugoslavian borderlands we can learn about the results of such choice of methods – it is an ever smoldering conflict that can not be put out “hard” way, and so often out of helplessness and in desperation “soft” methods like culture and education are employed, though it is always too late and without enough of necessary financial resources. That is also why the Eastern Partnership from its very beginning should be a culture project.

Adoption of the Polish-Swedish initiative by the EU made way for certain anxieties, among other problems it became a serious concern that for six states of so called “Eastern Dimension” the Eastern Partnership may be only a “second-best offer”, something instead of membership in the EU, to which some of these states aspire to (Georgia and Ukraine, in formal declarations also Moldova and Azerbaijan). Especially Ukraine expressed such concerns. On the other hand there were voices of “old” EU member states anxious that calling these six states as “European” may suggest that participation in the EaP equals future accession to the EU. Although we would wish for such accession in closer or more distant future, we can not disregard opinions of those Europeans who seem to be anxious about it, what is more we should do our best to dispel such anxieties. Also in that context the culture project seems to be the first such project that can develop dynamically, with no paralyzing constraints typical of the political arena, within the space created by the European Partnership to work for better neighborhood relations in Europe.

Is there a chance for the Eastern Partnership to take on a shape of culture project? Main goals of the EaP include creation of political association, establishing free trade area, gradual visa liberalization and deeper cooperation in energy security. Therefore the perspective is not limited only to “coal and steel”. The postulate to create New Framework for Multilateral Cooperation as one of four thematic platforms includes a platform for contacts with people. Culture activities are seen as important in the field of conflict resolution. Not including so called “hard security agenda” (desecuritization) in the framework of the EaP creates a chance for the EU to have more influence in conflict regions, such as Southern Caucasus, as so called “soft power”. Culture project focused *inter alia* on building confidence between partners, promoting inter-cultural dialogue,

building and strengthening structures of civil society, promoting critical historical reflection and restoring remembrance, apart from other positive effects, could efficiently strengthen security in conflict regions.

Angela Merkel during the Prague Summit said that the Eastern Partnership is as important as the Mediterranean Union (EUROMED). That way she referred to another project within the European Neighborhood Policy initiated during the Paris Summit in July 2008, which is a continuation of so called Barcelona Process launched in the EU in 1995. For us the reference made by Chancellor of Germany is important insofar as the Barcelona Process initiative, from the very beginning, put a lot of emphasis on culture aspect in its neighborhood partnership strategy. The strategy was developed taking into consideration three basic problem areas: economic, political and cultural. That philosophy is carried on by EUROMED and organizations which are its integral part: Ann Lindh Foundation dedicated to promote participation of citizens in partnership and inter-cultural dialogue or the Euro-Mediterranean University in Piran, Slovenia.

The Mediterranean is leaving us behind by giving culture an important place in its development strategy, allocating quite large financial resources and assigning vital undertakings. However it is worth noticing that the Eastern Partnership has already made first steps forecasting its development and perspective as a culture project. Inauguration of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the eve of the Prague Summit and under the auspices of the Czech Republic Presidency was a good prognostic for the future. During the Forum it was very much emphasized that the European Neighborhood Cooperation should be based on building civil society, students exchange, joint cultural and research programmes, involvement in the process of developing information society and independent mass media. Course of action undertaken by Civil Society Forum was superbly continued during „Go East!” Conference held in Warsaw in December 2009. The Conference, organized in four languages (Ukrainian, Russian, English and Polish), contributed to dialogue and exchange of best practices between leaders of NGO's, culture animators and local governments. The words of Rachman Badałow from Azerbaijan could be the leading motive of this debate. He said that *“culture in postindustrial world is no longer intruder of economy, but becomes basic drive power of society. Management of social and cultural processes will be the most important discipline of XXI century”*.

What should we do so that the Eastern Partnership could be build as a culture project which will add to authenticity and dynamism of the European Neighborhood Policy? Referring to this question/challenge from Polish perspective and understanding culture in a broader sense as a matter composed of layers of identity, creative artistic exploration, choices of philosophy of life, historical

memory and civilizational aspirations, we should realize that we have a task to revalue, rediscover and integrate the East at three levels: national, neighborhood and European.

The East at national level is our inferiority complex of being a province between Vistula and Bug rivers, complex of civilization distance between better developed western Poland A and less developed eastern Poland B. Despite high hopes of early transformation period for creation of equal opportunities the distance is getting longer. Today more audible are voices of economists who advice investing in Poland A at the expense of less developed regions, which in the future will (probably) be supported by those benefiting from directed preferential economic policy.

In response to real threat that Polish “East inferiority complex” would become stronger, with dangerous consequences for Poland that are not so difficult to predict, the board of strategic advisers directed by Michał Boni in the report “Poland 2030. Development Challenges” postulated introduction of polarization-diffusion model as beneficial for development in the nearest two decades. This model is based on assumption that *“apart from boosting growth polarities (i.e. polarisation processes), we have to primarily create conditions for diffusion – anything and everything which might support the process of equalizing education-related opportunities, improve transport accessibility of any place in the country, eliminate the threat of digital exclusion, improve social integration levels, structure and support a solidarity of generations, and offer a sense of capacity to follow individual ambitions”*. Conditions for diffusion can be successfully achieved by creation of space for individual strategies of choice for eastern regions, making it possible to build their own development potential what can *“increase their attractiveness improving functional ties with growth leaders”*. And so in the context of our deliberations it seems that involvement of eastern Poland in the Eastern Partnership is exactly such strategy that will set in motion our development potential. To say it differently, Polish participation in the EaP should be based *i.a.* on releasing the potential of regions and cities in the borderland area. Polish “East inferiority complex” should transform into Eastern competence. Regions and cities which want to strengthen and perfect this competence should get the support both from the state as well as from the EU so that they could invest, create structures, institutions and other modern tools for that purpose and become authentically involved and competent animators of the European Partnership.

The East at neighborhood level is a whole combination of issues and controversies concerning presence of Poland, especially the presence of Polish culture in the East, also on territories of the Eastern Partnership member states. Since the beginning of the EaP anxious comments were appearing that this new initiative of Warsaw and Stockholm in the EU may prove to be yet another attempt of Poland to colonize the East. No matter how irrational such fears of our

eastern neighbors may seem to us, we must be aware that these fears originate from historical dominance of Poland on these territories, from cultural assimilation of elites of neighboring countries, from often paternalistic and patronizing attitude towards these elites accompanied by poor knowledge of language and culture of eastern neighbors. Presence of Poland in the East has also its dark side – ethnic, religious and social conflicts, deportations to the East and “repatriation” to the West, loss of property and denationalization. When we build the foundation for new neighborhood policy it is hard to pretend that we do not notice that baggage of difficult and painful issues inherited by us from the history. Starting from ourselves we do understand that Polish people must summon up the courage for critical historical reflection and overcome the myth of former Polish Eastern Territories - perceived by neighbors as demonstration of power, hostile to their national emancipatory aspirations, by supporting the myth of Borderland focused on partnership and embodying in our tradition cultivated for centuries that what today in Europe is described as inter-cultural dialogue. We have done a lot in that respect, especially owing to circle of activists from journal *Kultura*. But we would only irritate Jerzy Giedroyc, if we assumed that everything had already been done, and it would be even more irritating, if we said: from now on let the others do all. The Eastern Partnership is a new opening and an enormous opportunity to create modern ethos of Borderland.

The East at European level means Poland as a constructor of European foreign policy, the European Neighborhood Policy or European culture project. It is not a coincidence that the Eastern Partnership is the first so important and successfully launched initiative in the European Union. Our eastern neighborhood, satellite, not federalized, separated from Europe by Schengen border, is actually our Polish truly European test. Today we shape our European identity in Brussels or Strasbourg, but we shape it even more in the East of Europe, on Russia and Turkey borderlands. It may sound as a paradox, but the East makes us modern Europeans. This is our identity, our *licentia poetica* in the European Union, our supranational horizon, the field on which we fight with our own resentments and historical fanaticism, this is our inferiority complex transformed into competence, our individual development strategy, our audible voice heard in metropolises of the West.

To sum up: Poland and its citizens will not be able to build the Eastern Partnership as culture project without overcoming inferiority complex of eastern Poland, without changing the paternalistic attitude towards our eastern neighbors and only after we fully accept our European identity.