

Mykola Riabchuk

AT THE FENCE OF METTERNICH'S GARDEN

Essays on Europe, Ukraine,
and Europeanization



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Contents

Introduction	7
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Part One

European Dreams	13
1. Behind the Fence	15
2. Barbecue in the European Garden.....	26
3. Ambiguous Borderland	36
4. ‘Eurasian’ Othering	48
5. Metaphors of Betrayal.....	54

Part Two

Maidan and Beyond	65
6. Not-So-Unexpected Nation	67
7. Pluralism by Default.....	79
8. What’s Left of Orange Ukraine?	91
9. The End of Post-Soviet Pragmatism?	101
10. After the Crash.....	107
11. Maidan 2.0.	113
12. The Fourteenth Worst Place	119
13. Dying for ‘Europe’	127
14. Crying Wolf	133
15. Ukraine’s Ordeal.....	140
16. Passions over Federalization.....	152
17. On the “Wrong” and “Right” Ukrainians	162
18. Turn to the Right– and Back.....	170

Part Three

Lessons of Solidarity	181
19. My Polish Schism.....	183
20. A Fortress of Rules.....	192
21. Repossessions	199
22. Eight Jews in Search of a Grandfather	209
23. How I Became a 'Czechoslovak'	223
24. On Bridges and Walls.....	234
25. An Incident	240
Bibliography	247
Index	251

Introduction

As early as 1918, the prominent Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who then headed the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic, published a cycle of political pamphlets under the characteristic title "On the Threshold of the New Ukraine." There, he tried to outline the basic principles and parameters upon which the nascent Ukrainian state should be built. He covered the army, culture, and government bureaucracy, as well as the various aspects of Ukraine's international politics, quintessentially defined in the title of one of his essays as "Our Western Orientation."

As a professional historian, he could easily prove that, for centuries,

Ukraine had been living the same life with the West, experiencing the same ideas and borrowing cultural models and resources for its own culture building. Yet, he knew also that since the end of the 18th century Ukrainian contacts with the West "had weakened and declined under the pressure of forceful russification of Ukrainian life; and Ukrainian life and culture had been drawn into a Russian, Greater Russian, period." As a result, "19th-century Ukraine was torn from the West, from Europe, and turned to the North, pushed forcefully into the deadlock-grip of Great Russian [imperial] culture and life. All Ukrainian life was uprooted from its natural environment, from the historically and geographically determined way of development, and thrown onto Russian soil, for destruction and pillage [Hrushevsky 1991: 141-144].

"Return to Europe," therefore, was seen by a leading Ukrainian nation-builder as a return to the norm, a fixing of historical injustice and perversion, a healing of a developmental pathology. Such a romantic approach emerged naturally from modern Ukrainian nationalism which, from its emergence in the first half of the 19th century, had to emphasize Ukraine's 'otherness' vis-à-vis Russia. This meant, in particular, that Ukrainian activists not just praised the alleged Ukrainian 'Europeanness' as opposed to evil Russian 'Asianness'; they had to accept the whole set of Western liberal-democratic values as 'natural' and 'organic' for Ukrainians (yet 'unnatural' for Russians).

Ukrainians built their claim to 'Europeanness' upon medieval and early-modern rather than modern history:

The Kievan State combined a predominantly Eastern, Greek, Byzantine religious and cultural tradition with a predominantly Western social and political structure ... Political Byzantinism remained totally alien to Kievan Rus ... In pre-Mongol Rus, as in the medieval West—and in contrast to Byzantium and Moscow—political and ecclesiastical authority were not fused, but remained distinct, with each of the two autonomous in its own sphere. A social system characterized by contractual relations, a strong regard for the rights and the dignity of the individual, limitation of the power of the prince by a council of boyars and a popular assembly, autonomous communal city life, territorial decentralization of a quasi-federative nature—all this gave the Kiev polity a distinct libertarian imprint. And this libertarian, essentially European spirit also characterizes Ukrainian state organizations of later epochs. The Galician-Volhynian state of the 13th and 14th centuries evolved toward a feudal structure, and full-fledged feudalism, including feudal parliamentarism, may be found in the Lithuanian-Ruthenian state of the 14th through 16th centuries. The Cossack State of the 17th and 18th centuries possessed a system of estates (*Staendestaat*). It was not a coincidence that in the 19th century, during the epoch when Ukraine was politically assimilated to the Russian Empire, all-Russian liberalism and constitutionalism found its strongest support in the Ukrainian provinces of the Empire [Rudnytsky 1987: 8].

Another Ukrainian historian, the Byzantologist Ihor Sevchenko, has also argued that “the West’s influence on parts of Ukrainian territory began before 1349, acquired considerable intensity after 1569, and continued over the vast expanse of Ukrainian lands until 1793. When we take into account the impact of Polish elites in western Ukrainian lands and the right bank of the Dnipro, this influence can be seen to have continued until 1918 or even 1939.” He admitted, however, that “this West was, for the most part, clad in the Polish *kontusz* ... and its principal cultural message in the decisive turning point between the 16th and 17th centuries was carried by the Polish variant of the Counter-Reformation” [Sevchenko 1996: 3–4, 6].

Sevchenko’s analysis had led him to what for many Ukrainians was an unpleasant conclusion; namely, that as soon as “neo-Byzantinism, the cultural mainstay of the tsardom of Moscow, lost out [and] the new Russian Empire began to import its culture from the West on a large scale ... it was that empire that soon provided its Ukrainian dominions with Western values.” In sum, “an important

general characteristic of Ukrainian cultural contacts both with the 'East' and with the West [was] the lack of direct access to original sources during long stretches of Ukrainian history. Ukrainians received cultural values from abroad through intermediaries ... The Ukrainian secondarity [sic] carried a certain weakness with it" [Sevcenko 1996: 8].

This perhaps explains Hrushevsky's phrase about the "deadlock grip of Great Russian culture," into which Ukraine had been arguably pushed since the 18th century. It was not a matter of Russian culture per se, which had eventually become rather vibrant, attractive and hospitable for many Ukrainian newcomers. It was a problem of "secondarity" that became an unavoidable, inescapable fate of the stateless nation dispossessed of its upper classes. Since then and until recently, Ukraine has been ruled by a territorial rather than the national elite, and this important fact determined its subsequent (under)development. It was only in 1991 that independent Ukraine's leaders recollected Hrushevsky's idea of the "return to Europe," and Hrushevsky himself returned to the national pantheon of the founding fathers of the new-old nation.

Still, the "return to Europe," although proclaimed officially as Ukraine's major strategic goal, was neither completed during the first decades after independence nor were any significant steps made in that direction besides political declarations and some very feeble and incoherent reforms. Some blame the West for not being interested in Ukraine's "return;" some blame Russia for effectively obstructing its efforts; some blame the Ukrainian leadership for paying lip-service to the idea while doing nothing to accomplish it; and some blame the Ukrainian people who, by and large, have not proven to be as 'European' as many Ukrainian intellectuals would like them to be.

All these arguments (or excuses) are serious enough to be examined in more detail, and I address each of them in this collection of essays that have been written mostly within the past 15 years. This time-span coincides with some very important and often dramatic changes in both Ukraine and its neighborhood. On the one side, Ukrainian civil society that had always, since perestroika, been an important political actor to be counted with, for the first

time appeared not just noticeable but victorious, during and in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange revolution. It failed ultimately, but set a new level of political competition and a new agenda for years to come. On the other side, the year 2004 marked the 'big bang' enlargement of the EU that erected de facto a new wall at Ukraine's western borders and deepened the feeling of abandonment and alienation. It coincided also with consolidation of an authoritarian regime in Russia and growth of a Kremlin 'assertiveness' that eventuated in gas, trade, and cyber wars with neighbors, military invasion of Georgia, and large-scale intervention in Ukraine.

Throughout all those years, I published many articles in periodicals, besides my primary (or parallel) academic activity. All of them were driven by two overlapping desires – to react directly to the events, developments, and problems that required, I felt, an immediate intervention; and to reach many more people than a scholarly article can ever do. Certainly, I could not avoid some academic terms and concepts, but all the time I tried to make the texts readable and comprehensive for any person with a high school diploma and not necessarily with a university degree. Here, I have selected only the articles that address Ukraine's 'European affair' – a painstaking but fascinating process of both its cultural and political 'Europeanization'. The process has both domestic and international aspects, both historical and contemporary dimensions. All of them are complex and all are intricately intertwined.

The title of the book refers, ironically, to the notorious Chancellor Metternich's quip that Asia begins presumably at the eastern fence of his garden (or, as another apocryphal version maintains, at the end of the Viennese Landstrasse). It hints at the garden of Eden – as many non-Westerners see the West, but also the Millennium-old garden of European culture and civilization that includes also specific political and social practices and institutions. It hints also at the Zbigniew Herbert's classic book *A Barbarian in the Garden* (1962), and at the popular slogan of Mykola Khvylovy, one of the leaders of the short-lived Ukrainian national revival of the 1920s (the "executed Renaissance"), who called on his compatriots to develop "psychological Europe" within Ukraine and among Ukrainians.

This is not a compassionate praise for Europe in Herbert's or Denis de Rougemont's style but rather an argument why Ukraine, existentially, cannot afford a move into any other direction; what obstacles, outside and within, it encounters; and how ultimately to overcome them. I compiled the book as a story of both exclusion and inclusion, of walls and fences but also of a longing for freedom and quest for solidarity. I wished it to be a book on different ways of being a 'European' – at both the collective and individual level – despite various challenges or, perhaps, thanks to them.

It consists of three parts that cover, respectively, the 'international' aspect of Ukraine's 'European affair', the 'domestic' part, and, so to say, my 'personal' part. Most of the articles were written in either Ukrainian or English and published usually in both languages but also, occasionally, in Polish, German, or Russian. The essay "How I Became a 'Czechoslovak'" broke records, being translated into a dozen languages including Farsi, Slovene, and Catalan, but it was rather exceptional.

I eschewed the temptation to make any substantial changes so as to look more perspicacious than I was 10 or 15 years ago, but I cut some passages to make the texts less repetitive. Also, I indicated the dates when the texts emerged and, in some cases, when the events in question occurred. All the essays are included in the collection with the permission of the original publishers. I am honored to list all of them, and express my deep gratitude to the European syndicate of cultural periodicals *Eurozine*, the Polish bi-monthly *New Eastern Europe*, the online quarterly *Russkii Vopros*, the quarterly *Aspen Review*, the web-platforms *Open Democracy* and *Transitions Online*, and last but not least, to the journal of studies in Polish Jewry *Polin* that commissioned a professional translation of one of my essays—the only one in this book rendered in English not by myself. The translator Marta Olynyk deserves full credit for her masterful work, as well as the editor of this volume Dr. Andrew Sorokowski. Special thanks to Dr. Andreas Umland, who encouraged me to complete this collection, to Dr. Ksenia Kiebuszinski, who perfectly guided my work at the University of Toronto library, and to Ms. Jana Oldfield, who sheltered me generously for a few

months when I was suddenly locked down in Toronto during the quarantine.

Ironically, the coveted “return to Europe” acquired for me a new, unexpected meaning. It became even more desirable but also even more based on strict rules and exact procedures. There are not only accession criteria but also absorption capacity to be counted with. There is little doubt that all the postcommunist states, including my own, need some ‘quarantine’ before being fully admitted into the ‘European family’. But genuine efforts are needed on both sides to facilitate the convalescence, and to fully complete the clearance and adaptation. I wish my book to contribute a bit to this process.

Toronto, April–May 2020

Part One

European Dreams

(1) Behind the Fence

1.

When in 1946, Konrad Adenauer stated that “Asia stands on the Elbe”, he just rephrased, consciously or unconsciously, the nineteenth-century joke of his Austrian colleague, chancellor Metternich, who used to say that the very place where Asia began was just behind the fence of his Viennese garden. For both of them, “Asia” was just another word for something hostile, barbarous and threatening the very existence of their (Western) civilization. For Metternich, implicitly, all the space east of Vienna was culturally inferior and suspicious. As many Westerners of the time, he believed that “the frontiers of civilization did not extend beyond the territorial aspirations of the more timorous Carolingian monarchs” [Judt 1990: 24].

But Adenauer hardly shared this view; in any case, he knew that there was East Germany east of the Elbe and that East Germans did not differ too much from their western compatriots, at least at that time. What he meant by “Asia standing on the Elbe” was a certain political reality brought as far as his own country by the Soviet troops and imposed on Eastern Europeans by brutal force, blackmail and political trickery. “Asia” meant for him not just another civilization—however inferior and alien it might be, as in Metternich’s view—but rather a lack of civilization, an ‘anti-civilization’ which threatened the most fundamental values of the Western world.

The Western perception of Eastern Europe, after 1946, had consisted of various combinations of both feelings, ‘Adenauer’s’ and ‘Metternich’s’. On the one hand, the Westerners recognized that to the east of the Elbe and Metternich’s garden there was also Europe, even though poorer and despised. They knew that this Europe did not accept its ‘Asian’ status voluntarily and that she tried desperately to get rid of it—by all possible means. But, on the other hand, they felt that something was wrong with this part of Europe, since she allowed herself to be swallowed up and since she had

been victimized so often and heavily throughout her history. Probably, some Westerners mused, she was guilty herself; she was predisposed and, in fact, doomed to be victimized permanently because she was not European enough, she was not 'like us', lucky and happy, she was inferior. As under-Europe, or semi-Europe, she had equal chances to grow up to true Europeanness or to dissolve into entropic Asiaticness. She had lost the first chance that was gifted her after WWI, and now she must pay for it. There was nobody to blame except herself.

A guilty conscience is extremely inventive. Metternich's approach provided Westerners with a good rationale for their behind-the-fence status; it perfectly reconciled them with Munich and Yalta, with "non-interference" in Soviet "internal affairs" – whether it was the destruction of Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian independence in the early 1920s, or the invasion of Budapest and Prague in the 1950s and 1960s. This approach was reflected in Lloyd George's remark on trading even with cannibals, as well as in Roosevelt's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Russia in 1933, exactly when five to six million Ukrainians were being starved to death by Kremlin cannibals willing to trade.

This approach was expressed quintessentially in the following statement of the British Foreign Office: "The truth of the matter is, of course, that we have a certain amount of information about famine conditions in the south of Russia (sic), similar to that which had appeared in the press ... We do not want to make it public, however, because the Soviet government would resent it and our relations with them would be prejudiced" [Carynnyk et al. 1988: 397]

But there is still another side of the problem. Eastern Europe is not as remote a territory as Chechnya, or Georgia, or Armenia, or Kurdistan. Its appearance had been troublesome, its complete disappearance may have been disastrous. The common enemy, threatening from the East, had united Western and Eastern Europeans much more than any common cultural heritage; "Asia", the powerful 'other', to a large extent determined the common identity of the Westerners and the Easterners. Even though the Westerners knew that the 'true' Europe began somewhere at the Elbe and Vienna, they saw clearly that "Asia" was coming and that the not-so-true

Europe, under these circumstances, should be preserved as a more preferable neighbor. Yes, after Yalta it had been ceded to Stalin, but it still could be maintained somehow as, at least, a not-so-true "Asia."

Hence, the predominant Western attitude towards the Easterners had always been ambivalent if not ambiguous. On the one hand, many of them believed that the Easterners, to a different degree, deserved their destiny (any people, actually, have the government they deserve!); but on the other hand, many Westerners felt that the Easterners who resisted "Asia's" advance, did deserve (to a different degree) their sympathy and support. And indeed, the Easterners had enjoyed this support – to the extent described above by the statement of the British Foreign Office: not to irritate the Soviet government and not to deteriorate the relations with them. In other words, not to mar trade with the cannibals completely.

Of course, there have always been some intellectuals in the West who perceived Eastern Europe without an Orientalizing gaze and primordialistic bias. For some of them, Central Europe has become the "idealized Europe of [their] cultural nostalgia." They demonstrated at Soviet embassies and organized various committees to defend eastern dissidents with unpronounceable names; they signed petitions and published articles; they visited East European capitals and smuggled subversive literature; sometimes they became more native than the natives themselves; they were involved, engaged, and enchanted. Many of them enthusiastically believed that "this part of the Continent was once a near-paradise of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic multiplicity and compatibility, producing untold cultural and intellectual riches" [Judt 1990: 48], and that despite totalitarianism, or even because of it (in response to its pressure), Eastern Europe was a country of "wonderful spiritual tension" [Zagajewski 1987: 36]. This view, however plausible it might be, never spread beyond the narrow circle of specialists on the area and members of the East European diaspora.

In general, the ambiguous Western attitude toward Eastern Europe has been largely determined by geopolitics, i.e., by cold calculations and the age-old principle "charity begins at home." It may seem reasonable and hardly blameworthy. What was repre-

hensible, from the Easterners' point of view, and ultimately detrimental for the very idea of liberal democracy and for the West as its standard-bearer, was the perceived cynicism of Western politics and its penchant for double standards, both at home and elsewhere. The Easterners could not take in the Weberian notion of morality in politics as arguably determined not by motives, however nice, but by the ultimate (and achievable) results. They felt like abandoned lovers, seduced by lofty ideas and passionate words but left in the cold, with a crude "Asia" on the one side, and a restrained *Realpolitik* on the other.

Not so seldom, this disappointment resulted in zealous anti-Westernism, nationalism, xenophobia, isolationism, and autarky. Indeed, the question whether the Western civilization is superior to any other civilization, is not so simple, as we know nowadays from the bountiful postcolonial writing. Whatever we think on the issue, we cannot dismiss the sheer fact that Eastern Europe is a part of Europe and, moreover, a part of the modern world. And modernity, whether we like it or not, is unavoidable and inescapable, insofar as humankind has entered it. We may regret, and complain, and condemn it, but there is no way back. It is like the biblical Fall, the lost innocence, the bygone childhood. We may dislike our adult life but it is the only life to live. We may find the Western political system sometimes arrogant, sometimes hypocritical, but all other systems are worse, and all the attempts to install them, to alter modernity with some kind of pre-modern or anti-modern utopia proves funny at best, or bloody and exhausting at worst—as we could observe in too many places in the world.

Our attitude to the West should be neither extolling nor disparaging. The West represents rather relative than absolute goodness. For East Europeans, who have been sandwiched between the West and Russia, it merely means that the West is a lesser, much lesser, evil. Such a measured, ambivalent attitude might be perhaps a good response to the Western ambiguity vis-à-vis the East. There are no permanent friends in international relations but there are permanent interests. The East Europeans' primary interest has been to survive, the Western Europeans' interest has been the same, albeit far less topical and existential.

The East Europeans are still [1997] much closer to “Asia”; their democracies, economies, and military forces are much weaker; their escape from “Asia’s” sphere of influence still is questionable, and their independence is vulnerable in all possible terms. Hardly surprising then, that they want to remove the fence of Metternich’s garden as far to the east as possible. And hardly surprising that the Westerners do not understand this haste and nervousness. For the Westerners, “Asia’s” comeback looks neither plausible nor very daunting. They have more time to prepare themselves for any surprise, and they have more means to encounter it.

Thus, the East Europeans can really rely on their Western neighbors—but only to the extent to which their interests coincide. Sometimes they coincide significantly, sometimes not. But at no time should the Easterners rely on their Western allies completely. It is not a marriage of love, but merely of convenience. At any time, the Western attitude may suddenly change because of some higher reasons, some whimsical calculations—or misreasons and miscalculations, ultimately it does not matter. What really matters is that any moment the East Europeans may be betrayed again, and sacrificed, as it has happened not once in history.

All their advantages notwithstanding, they have neither the military nor the economic resources of Russia. And they will never be as attractive, promising, disappointing, concerning, disturbing, menacing as their Eurasian neighbor. In these terms, the Western approach towards Eastern Europe will always remain as it has always been, utilitarian and instrumental. Charity begins at home, just keep this in mind.

2.

So what can Eastern Europe offer to the West? Geopolitical stability? Yes, to a certain degree, but the major concern still is Russia, and world’s security and stability depend mostly on developments there. Of course, Eastern Europe may have assumed again the role of *cordon sanitaire*, if it was stable itself (the Balkans are the major yet not the only problem), and if this role (a “linchpin of the new post-Cold War Europe,” in Strobe Talbott’s words) has not shifted

eastward, to Ukraine. Then, maybe Eastern Europe can attract the West economically? Hardly so. There are no important natural resources there, and there is a dearth of goods that could compete on the Western markets. And the cheap labor force from the East is probably even less needed in the West than the cheap Eastern goods. Perhaps only some problems of economic as well as political transition may draw the attention of Western specialists – as material for esoteric books, articles and Ph.D. dissertations.

Then what about the culture, the last fortress where East Europeans retreated after numerous historical blows and where they cherished their imaginary statehood, their imaginary European-ness, their inner freedom? Indeed, they have much to offer in this field; the last decades of communism witnessed an enormous revival of various forms of cultural activity, both in the legal framework and underground. But again, it was a high culture which could hardly affect anybody except a narrow circle of intellectuals, both in the East and in the West. Of course, the favorable political conjuncture of the 1980s had largely facilitated the influx of East European books, films, and fine arts to the West. And some East European names became really fashionable – not so much, however, from their major works as from their op-ed articles and interviews featured in the major Western newspapers and magazines. In 1989–1990, when this vogue reached its climax, Tony Judt complained that “the whole subject remains in the hands of the *Zivilisationsliterati*, of East and West alike,” but he also quite reasonably assumed that “after all, the fashion will pass, but it will at the very least leave in paperback translations a library full of works by authors, living and dead, of whom the Western reader was hitherto ignorant” [Judt 1990: 50].

In the West, however, as elsewhere in the world, ignorance can be quite compatible with the best libraries, full of the greatest works. I have met a lot of university students in the U.S. who had never heard names like Goethe, Faust, or Gogol, so I was not surprised that only a few of them knew who was Milosz, Brodsky, or Kundera (Havel appeared a bit more recognizable but mostly as a politician rather than a playwright). But even this partial ‘success’ of the Easterners is very likely to fade in the nearest future, since

the communist threat has disappeared, the evil empire presumably fell in rubble, and new celebrities from the East, like Zhirinovskiy, Zyuganov, and Lukashenko, have advanced in the pages of Western newspapers. Manchester capitalism seems to be less supportive for the liberal arts in Eastern Europe than over-aged and senile communism.

Today [1997], as we can easily notice, the best filmmakers move to the West to make their fortunes; and the best East European artists follow them and paint everything, including fences and walls; and the best musicians perform usually abroad, sometimes in Carnegie Hall, more often in churches and restaurants; and the writers and scholars penetrate Western universities to teach whatever they can: one of them (Yevgeny Yevtushenko) confessed recently in *The New York Times* that he is neither qualified nor academically prepared to teach Pushkin but, in his words, he loves the poet and will teach the love.

Apparently, it is not just a Polish but an East European problem; the tremendous endeavor of East European intellectuals to withstand totalitarianism and to preserve inner freedom has passed out and become history. Today [1997], the region enters a new, non-heroic era when the old habits of resistance and fighting are obsolete while the new habits of mundane systemic work are not yet acquired. The combatants of the long anticommunist struggle may feel disappointed and dissatisfied; they still employ their outdated discourse (and the harped-upon Central East European myth is just a part of it), but East European societies seem to be not very interested. Some people are lured by the populists, some turn back to the familiar communists, and some simply switch off their ears and brains from any political messages. We have entered a new epoch, and new leaders, ideas, and slogans are apparently needed. And Tony Judt's sobering criticism of the Central European mythology might be as topical nowadays as ever:

To suppose that this part of the Continent was once a near-paradise of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic multiplicity and compatibility, producing untold cultural and intellectual riches, has been part of the Western image in recent years. Yet [...] in truth Central Europe, from the Battle of the White Mountain down to the present, is a region of enduring ethnic and religious

intolerance, marked by bitter quarrels, murderous wars, and frequent slaughter on a scale ranging from pogrom to genocide. Western Europe was not always much better, of course, but on the whole it has been luckier, which is almost as good [Judt 1990: 48].

Milan Kundera was certainly right when describing Central Europe as “not a state” but “a culture or a fate.” “Its borders [he wrote] are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation. Central Europe therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers [...] but by the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.”

But he was apparently wrong when explaining why this myth (this “imaginary realm”, in his words) had not been appealing to Westerners; why it was considered as “outmoded and [was] not understood.” In Kundera’s view, Western Europe itself was “in the process of losing its own cultural identity,” “it no longer perceive[d] its unity as a cultural unity”; and because of this “it perceive[d] in Central Europe nothing but a political regime; put another way, it [saw] in Central Europe only Eastern Europe” [Kundera 1984: 36–37].

There is no need at this point to go deeper into the problem of European identity as based on a common religion and culture (“the supreme values by which European humanity understood itself, defined itself, identified itself as European”). The major vulnerability of Kundera’s arguments does not lie in his hypothesis that there was a moment when European identity changed and culture bowed out, giving way to the marketplace, to technical feats, to mass media and to politics. Maybe he is right, maybe not. What seems to be really questionable in his theory is an unproved assumption that, before that very moment, Eastern Europe had been perceived in Europe as its integral part. History gives little evidence for this argument. To the contrary, Shakespeare’s well-known remark from the *Tempest* (“Bohemia. A desert country near the sea”) could serve a good motto to the entire history of Western-Eastern

relations. "A desert country near the sea" is just another term for the black hole behind the fence of Metternich's garden.

Today, Eastern Europeans have a good chance to remove the fence to the east—somewhere to the western or eastern Ukrainian borders (this depends on many circumstances, but first and foremost on the commitment of the removers). And then, Eastern Europe may have become just a Europe, without additional qualifications and humiliating discussions about who is 'more' Central and 'more' European. Exactly, as nobody in Benelux or in Switzerland cares whether they are Western or 'Central Western' Europeans.

3.

Like any myth, the concept of Central Eastern Europe will not dissipate immediately. It will exist until there is Eastern Europe as a certain post-communist reality, and until unpredictable "Asia" stands on the Bug, or the Dnieper, or elsewhere eastward. As any myth, it has its own power, since it was created as a rephrasing of classical myths—those of the lost paradise and the promised land. The paradise was the Habsburg Empire and "cultural unity", while the promised land was the EC, NATO and, again, "cultural unity" within a broader scope. In the internal sphere, this myth facilitated popular anti-Soviet and anticommunist mobilization; in the international sphere, it substantiated demands to the West for further recognition and support.

Yet, from the very beginning, this myth proved to be extremely exclusivist and, thereby, harmful; its side effect was not only the mystification of 'central' Easterners with overly pinkish visions of their pasts and futures, but also the establishment of a very dubious hierarchy of 'more' and 'less European' nations in Eastern Europe. Since 'European belonging', under peculiar political circumstances, had been far more than just a cultural/geographical notion, the detachment of some 'Central' European nations from Eastern Europe implicitly meant that the non-members of this privileged club did deserve less, if any, Western attention and help. In practical terms, it looked like a quarrel among the prisoners over

which of them used to love freedom more and deserved to be released first.

Today [1997], as the 'central' Easterners elbow their way to EC and NATO and raise up their European credentials, one cannot but notice, with some regret, that they appear no less exclusivist than the Westerners as soon as they manage to jump over Metternich's fence. And now, they come to believe that "Asia" begins somewhere to the east of Poland and to the south of Hungary, and that Macedonia, Belarus, and Armenia are but more "desert countries near the sea." The Westerners had already paid the price for their exclusiveness, but for the Easterners, the price may be much higher.

All our talk about cultural unity is worthless as long as we neglect Albanians because they are poor, we neglect Belarusians because they are heavily Sovietized, we neglect Lusatian Sorbs because they are too small, we neglect Georgians and Armenians because these two oldest Christian nations are too far away from our gardens.

Who cares about all that? Who cares about wonderful Georgian cinema, which certainly was the best in the former Soviet Union and, perhaps, one of the most interesting in the world? Who cares about excellent Georgian theatre, painting, about the bright philosophers and translators (the first and only translation of Joyce's *Ulysses* in the USSR was Georgian!). Who cares about great Georgian literature, which has at least two modern writers, Otar Chiladze and Chabua Amiredjibi, who would have honored the long list of Nobel Prize winners if anybody managed to read and translate them from their incomprehensible language ... Again, the "tremendous intensity of spirit," the "wild hunger for Europe" demonstrated by a small East European nation which never lost its cultural longing for Europe, have not been noticed anywhere, even by the closest neighbors. So how can we, "Central East Europeans", complain about somebody's ignorance, being equally ignorant ourselves?!

My Ukrainian friends may contend that their country, at least its westernmost part, is no less 'Central European' than Poland or Slovakia – but how to promote it into the privileged club of 'true' Central Europeans, if even Croats and Transylvanians look at the

entrance as rather suspicious candidates? My friends may argue that the Central European, 'Habsburgian', myth is alive in Ukrainian Lviv even more than in Vienna or Prague; they may bring, among many proofs, the programmatic issue of the journal "i" — with Ukrainian translations of Bruno Schulz, Sacher-Masoch and Milan Kundera, and the stylish portrait of the emperor Franz Josef on the cover sheet of their coveted holy scripture. They would barely understand why the 'true' Europeans just laugh at it or, at best, smile condescendingly.

Sincerely, I believe we should stop this competition in symbolism and focus more on daily life and mundane issues. If we believe in 'Europe' as a system of values, we should promote them within, regardless of whether we are located in Central, or Eastern, or Central-Eastern Europe, or on the Pacific rim. Small is beautiful, and marginality might be an asset. It depends on how we manage to use its tricky advantages.

The process which Eastern Europe is undergoing now can be called normalization. It is interesting but hardly attractive. It promises little room for any 'uniqueness' and would certainly dissatisfy East European intellectuals who want their countries to be at the forefront of world attention. But the combatant consciousness must have gone, and exhibitionist complexes vanished. In the best scenario — unless 'Asia' returns, and new dictatorships re-emerge, and a new Bosnia flares up — Eastern Europe would be successfully marginalized and would certainly draw no more attention than Greece, Portugal, Finland, or Iceland. Is that so bad? For old combatants — probably yes, but for most people — no. Most people don't care about the fence, whether it's eastern, or central, or south-eastern. They care about the garden. I feel it's a good time to roll up our sleeves and till it.