ATTITUDES TOWARDS WEST AND EAST AS THE MAIN ELEMENT OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN IDENTITY: REFLECTIONS ONE THE POLISH CASE

1. West and East as Points of Reference for Central European Identity

The East and the West are perceived in Central Europe in different dimensions depending on the historical, geographical and political circumstances. Their definitions also differ considerably. East and West can be understood respectively as Western Civilization and Eastern Despotism. In other cases West can be identified with Germans and East with Eastern Slavs or, as it is most often in the Polish case, West is Germany and East Russia. In this context, by West and East I will most often mean here Western Europe and Russia. Both of them can be considered as important points of reference for Polish and to the large extend, for the Central European identity. The Russian factor is especially important in the Polish case because of close neighborhood of the two countries, long history of rivalry and conflicts and close ethnic and cultural links.

Almost everywhere in the world the question "Who are we?" is to the large extend answered by specifying "what differs us from others". In general Poles as well as many other Central Europeans define themselves by specifying in what they differ from West and East Europeans, the later most often identified with Russians.

If treated seriously, this is not an easy task. Analysed carefully, it becomes clear that relations with what is considered as West and East can be perceived in several
dimensions and in different contexts. Thus, we can see numerous dilemmas with which any Central European trying to define its identity is confronted.

In my paper I would like to discuss only two of these dilemmas. They will be of course generalized and are only part of a long list which could be elaborated. After a short reflection I will present two examples of identity programs which can illustrate the role the presented dilemmas play in the construction of the Polish identity.

2. The Dilemma of the attitude toward the West

Being a part of the Western European civilization, Central Europeans always suffered from inferiority complexes resulting from their peripheral location in relation to the Western European Core and moreover from the struggles to remain on the political map of Europe. In effect two often contradictory elements appear in the Central European awareness: the strive for manifestation of Western European character of their history, culture and at the same time manifestation of their uniqueness, exceptionality and special character as reasons for independent, sovereign existence and arguments for international recognition and respect.

Along with the political dimension of relations between Western and Central Europe we can separately consider the issue of economic or even, as some would argue, civilizational underdevelopment of the region in relation to the West.

Hence the major dilemma facing Central Europeans in attempts to define their attitude towards the West. Copy the West or try to retain and develop your own originality. In other words: Pursuit of Europe or Escape from Europe. The solution may not be in one of these extremes, but finding an acceptable point between them is not an easy task. Moreover these two extreme options can be found to have several, quite different variants. The pursuit of Europe may have even the form of rejection of the own, national culture in order to prove one's own European, Western character. In such cases the differences between West and Central Europe are most often reduced to disparities in wealth—poor Center—East vs. rich West.

Such extreme reasoning, although rarely appearing in public discourse, can be however noticed in every day life. An interesting example of "escape from one’s own national identity" in Poland give emigrants entitled to German citizenship, mainly coming from region of Upper Silesia. When leaving Poland for Germany many of them see the isolation from Polish identity as the condition for entering the better and richer world. Many of the Upper Silesians living in Poland and identifying themselves with German nationality define themselves not only in opposition to their Polish roots but also to their Silesian roots. Rykiel gives a spectacular example of "new habit of wearing Bavarian or Frankonian folk costumes rather than traditional Upper Silesian dress, which is believed to be 'too Polish'". As many observers confirm, the higher the

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1 Historian Piotr Wandycz concludes that the considerable part of the Central European history is the history of the fight for freedom. For this reason he has even entitled his well known book on the history of Central Eastern Europe *The Price of Freedom*.

social position of Polish emigrants in Germany, the easier for them to openly identify themselves with Polish roots. We can probably expect the same process to progress on a larger, national scale. The greater the wealth of the country and easier and more widespread access to Western-style consumer goods in Central European countries, the lesser the reasons for such extreme behavior.

Another type “pursuers of Europe” are so called “Euroenthousiasts”, who consider any negative or even indifferent attitude towards European Union as a manifestation of backwardness and ignorance.

On the other hand we have several models of reserved or even negative attitude toward European core in Central Europe. The most extreme have the form of isolationism which is most often based on the idea of preserving the endangered national identity. The fear of Europe is here in fact the fear of own cultural weakness. It expresses the lack of confidence in the country’s vital forces, and in the strength of its identity in relation to the Western culture, often seen as aggressive and imperial.

However, besides such isolationist options we can also observe several moderate versions of Euro-skepticism in which the emphasis is put on the need of originality and creativity of the region in all spheres of cultural and economic activity. From such point of view the strength of the country can not be built only on the mechanic imitation but to the large extend on the development of it’s own innovativeness and cultural independence.

One of the fundamental question behind the dilemma of the relation towards the West is of course the judgement and interpretation of one’s own history.

The problem of interpretation of history could be divided into thousands of individual questions calling for separate discussion. But in the most general terms it can be reduced to a fundamental question of 'how do we assess our history?'. As positive, often tragic but worth of remembrance, in which one can take pride, satisfaction and inspiration, or do we consider our historical achievements as insignificant or completely outdated, and thus unimportant? Is our history a history of collapses and failures due to our own helplessness and weakness or due to foreign aggressions and interventions?

In other words do we have to radically brake with our historical past, or at least its part, and build new identity on the base of the Western model, or should we consider our history as the main fundament of our renewed identity.

3. The Dilemma of the attitude toward the East

The Central European attitudes toward the Eastern part of the continent, especially Russia, are also closely connected with the evaluation of own history and cultural potency.

In most cases Russia is perceived simply as a reverse of the West. Symbol of backwardness, despotism and disorder. Thus there is extremely negative attitude toward everything related with East and Russian.

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3 For example “Polityka”, 1996.
Such perception is of course not so widespread in such countries of Central-Eastern Europe as Ukraine and, especially, Belarus where Russia plays in some way the role the West has in relation to Central Europe.

However the real dilemma for the Central European and especially Polish identity is not between the union with Europe or union with Russia, but between absolute rejection of Eastern cultural and historical links and partial recognition of those.

The dilemma has the similar character to the first one connected with the attitude toward the West, since it is also determined by the factor of positive or negative evaluation of own history.

In fact, one of the main problems of the Central European identity is the problem of temporal and spatial localization of the nations weakness. In other words where and when we find the sources of our deficiencies?

In the spatial dimension the sources of countrys weaknesses can be divided first of all between internal and external. In the later case the negative traits of national character are connected with influences from particular neighbors or regions. Here again the West and East are the most often quoted directions from which fatal influences were coming. In the Polish case East has certainly worse reputation, although the opinion that most Polish problems results from the countrys location between Russia and Germany is not unusual.

The temporal dimension of search for sources of national shortcomings is closely related with spatial one. Identifying particular historical periods as especially critical from point of view of national problems implies also more or less direct spatial localization of their sources. In the case of Poland they can be related with the very roots of Polish nation, or for example the Swedish Deluge, 18th century anarchy and decadence, period of partitions, especially the Russian occupation, Second World War and finally the Communist Era of Soviet domination.

In other words the discussion concerns the depth of the Central European underdevelopment. The fundamental questions then is the following. Is the inability to create effective, creative and well organised states and societies the profound and structural characteristic of the Central Europe, or is it the problem of transitory character connected mainly with difficult external conditions of development?

For those convinced about a rather deep character of Central European weaknesses, the Eastern connection of the region is ideal to point out as the main source of problems of the national characters.

In the case of Poland the negative influences can be related with external factors as the Russian or in general the Byzantine heritage and with the more local factor of Slavonic character reinforced additionally by Russian occupations and influences in XIX and XX centuries.

Using adjectives like Russian, Slavonic and Byzantine as synonyms with clearly negative connotation can be noticed both in public and private discourse in Poland. They all refer in such contexts to same “Eastern syndrome” of Polish character and are identified with such traits as alcoholism, provintionalism, lack of respect for law, mendacity, secretiveness, laziness, disorderliness, etc. What is Slavonic than in Polish character is simply Russian in its very negative understanding.

From such a point of view all these negative characteristics are Easter accretions on the Polish fundamentally Western, Latin culture, or elements of the traditional local backwardness which should be unrooted as soon as possible. Therefore Polish
Attitudes towards West and East as the main element...

aspirations of joining European community must imply from such point of view active fight with these aspects of national legacy.

The opposite, let call it Slavophile option is today in the Polish case practically unnoticeable. Of course there were always Poles fascinated with the projects visions of Russian—Polish political rapprochement, but their visibility in the public discourse in minimal.

Between these extreme opposite attitudes towards the East we find advocates of different intermediate options which are viewed by different authors in different dimensions. One point of view is reduced to the political sphere where the contacts with imperial and despotic Russia automatically implies the turning away from Wester Europe.

On the other hand contacts with Eastern Europe can be seen in light of economic cooperation which is often considered as a great opportunity for the development of Central European countries, because of their natural connection with the great Eastern market.

Another perspective is the cultural aspect of the Eastern connection. In this dimension contacts with Russia can be, according to some opinions, practically unrelated with its imperial regime. Moreover, they may lead in some cases even to conflicts with official Moscow since the most valuable and famous of Russian artists and social activists often act against the official social and ideological norms of their country

These are some of the several ways of finding solutions for reconciliation between Western and Eastern elements recognized in own identity. The crucial mechanism of construction of such solutions is of course the redefinition of the meanings of West and East as identity components.

The negative opposition of civilized West vs. wild, barbarious East can be replaced for example with such philosophical approach as Western materialism vs. Eastern spirituality or Western Aristotelian vs. Eastern Platonian visions of the world.

From such a point of view Central Europe is seen either as a meeting place of Latin and Orthodox traditions, or in a more moderate approach, as the region of Latin culture enriched by strong influences of Byzantine civilization.

Appreciation of the Eastern element in own roots, may from such point of view improve the understanding of the European culture, by for example better understanding of the differences between the two fundamental approaches to material world: Aristotelian and Platonian or may help in finding the balance between the two constitutional elements of European civilization: faith and reason, material and spiritual aspects of life.

Such approach be compared with other similar conceptions. First of all we could present the traditional Russian conceptions, in which Russia aspires to the role of the country uniting East and West and intermediating in their contacts. For example as the well-known Russian film maker Nikita Mikhalkov puts it, Russian character combines the Western reason with the wisdom of the East.

As it seems to me both dilemmas towards East and West could be summarized in the general dilemma of Central European identity: The dilemma, which I see between schizophrenic self-condemnation and idle self-complacency. Central Europeans must find their reasonable balance between these two extreme states.
Let me now present two examples of attempts of constructions of original patterns of Central European identity. They were thought to illustrate the role the above discussed questions of attitudes towards West and East play in the process of Central European self-identification. Their selection was based rather on their originality than representativeness.

Although they could be even considered as not widely known, and Polish specific, they seem to contain the most important elements characteristic for the fundamental of typical model of Central European Identities. What is the most crucial in this context is the importance of the attitudes towards both the West and the East in Central European selfdefinitions.

4. In search of own orgnallity and uniqueness—
Example I: Ideals of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

The fist example of the Central European identity conception is the idea of revitalizing of the ideals of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The social, legal and political achievements of the "Rzeczpospolita" are well known to majority of educated Poles. In my paper I would like to present them from another viewpoint, following the approach of David Zincavage. This American of the Lithuanian origin promotes the below presented ideals of, as he calls it, "fanciful and romantic idea of revival of the Grand Duchy" in the posting to the Internet "Baltic Republics Discussion Lists".4

The most important element of the "Rzeczpospolita" ideal was of course democracy and tolerance of unusual quality taking into account the historical circumstance. Let me quote Zincavage:

"Historians typically estimate that 10% of the overall population of the pre-Partitions Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth belonged to the Noble Estate. Of the Roman Catholic Population, the percentage is estimated at 25%. Outside Samogita, most Lithuanians are Roman Catholic. Southern Lithuania, along with Masovia, was especially noted for the large numbers of petty gentry inhabiting their own villages, plowing their own fields wearing a sword. That noble elite was no so small. Nor was most of it richer than its neighbors.

The Athenian democracy in Antiquity could boast that it was more democratic than Poland as a whole, roughly 20% versus 10%, but if we take the Jews into account who enjoyed self-rule, they add another 10%. We could compare England in the 19th century, prior to the passage of the Reform Act, where only 2% of the population were enfranchised, to Medieval Poland".5

Thus, inheritors of the Commonwealth legacy can take pride in its ideals even today and should not, according to Zincavage, adopt the Western imposed vision of their inferiority. They should rediscover their old traditions, which may be a source

4 Internet address of the discussion list: BALT-L@UBVM.BITNET. List editor: Edis Bevan < A. E. B. Bevan@open.ac.uk >.
5 David Zincavage. BALT-L 6167. 25 Nov 1995,
of inspiration in building of new identity as well as rebuilding democratic system. Zincavage writes:

"The provinciality of the Western European historical perspective (particularly, the Anglo-Saxon one) is most regrettable. It took the nations of Western Europe until the 17th and 18th century to begin the task of demolishing the absolutist institutions which they had permitted to grow up in their countries, and to begin to suppose that government rested upon the consent of the governed. Even at present time, the western commitment to tolerance and personal freedom can hardly be claimed to have arrived at the level which prevailed in medieval Poland and Lithuania"6.

In another message Zincavage adds:

"For hundreds of years, they (Lithuania and Poland) were in a position to offer instructions in freedom, tolerance and pluralism to Western European states like England and France, why should they slavishly follow the modern Anglo-Saxon political example now? Cardinal Hosius, a good Lithuanian, head of the Counter-Reformation in Poland, warned the Commonwealths against following the barbarous behavior of the English during Queen Mary's reign when the English burned Protestants at the stake"7.

The attitude toward West is marked not only by the pride in the historical legacy but also by lack of confidence in the West as a real ally of Central Europe. Zincavage writes:

"(...) Lithuania cannot rely upon the West to protect her. The West did not protect Lithuania in 1772, 1793, 1795, 1815, 1831, 1863, 1939, 1945 or 1991, and there is no reason to suppose that the West will act differently in the future"8.

Such assumptions, especially shared by Central-Eastern Europeans (Baltic States, Ukraine), but known also in Poland may lead in political dimension to the idea of the Central European alliance. The idea should not be confused with other groupings as for example the Visegrad group of countries aspiring to the membership in the European Union. The "Inter Sea"9 (name of the region between Baltic and Black seas) alliance is rather unnoticed initiative of politicians from Ukraine, Poland, Baltic States and Belarus and has at its main aim the self defense of the countries of Central and Central-Eastern Europe against Russia. In the "League of Political Parties of the Inter-Sea Countries"10 participate only one Polish party present in parliament (KPN—Confederation of Independent Poland). However in Ukraine several important political parties are present (Democratic Party, Congress of Ukrainian Nationalist, Greens, Socialdemocrats, Republican Party). Absent are of course communists and radical nationalist. Lithuania is also represented by influential Conservative Party and Lithuanian National Union. Although the initiative is practically insignificant in international dimension, and practically unknown in Poland it has been widely reported in Russian, especially communist press, where it was presented as aggressive anti-Russian initiative.

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8 David Zincavage. BALT-L 5675. 21 March 1996.
In such approach, where emphasis is put rather on political ideals than on the cultural dimension, East is divided into two zones. The first one is Central-Eastern Europe group of former Western Soviet republics. The Byzantine background of some of them is not so important in contrasts to their Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth legacy which distinguishes them sharply from Russia itself. The second one, Russia is the real "East" and the real threat. "The empire of the Bolsheviks or that of the Tsars", as Zincavage puts it, "was always simply an Oriental despotism ruled by terror". In such a conception Central Europe is assigned the role of "Antemurale", unappreciated shield of Western Europe against threats coming from the East.

Finally let me quote Zincavage for his general attitude towards the historical legacy, which is another important element of definition of national or regional identity.

Most of our history is a good history, and though a tragic one, it is a history that one can be very proud of. We saved the Ruthenians from the Tatars. We defended Europe's borders from barbarians. We gave refuge to the Jews and other persecuted peoples and protected them. We were more civilized than any other nation because we were more tolerant, and more freedom loving.

5. In search of own originality and uniqueness—
Example II: The Messianic Mission of Poland

Another example of search for Central Europe's own uniqueness is the messianic ideal, old concept with long tradition in Poland. The messianic idea first appeared in Poland already at the beginning of 19th century, during the period of partition of the country. The most influential Polish messianist was the greatest national poet Adam Mickiewicz. In his conception Poland played the role of "Christ of the Nations" as she suffered for redemption of sins of other nations and in this way had important role to play in their moral transformation. Since that time Poland had several other ideologues of messianism and similar conceptions concerning "the special role of the nation" appeared in other Central European nations.

In Poland, as it appears the idea is still alive. It has been for example recently recalled by the young but influential magazine "Fronda". In their presentation the emphasis was put on the vision of the blessed nun Faustyna Kowalska. According to her diaries from late thirties Poland was especially bellowed by Christ. If Poland will be obedient to the God's will it will play an important role in the conversion of the world.

The messianic concept, especially in its version presented in "Fronda", should not be too easily related with typical nationalist option. In messianism both universalism and national ideals are combined and may result in absolutely non aggressive vision of the country's role. The special character of the country is not granted, but conditional. The messianic task, although having international effect—the deliverance of the world—is based mainly on internal work on its own conversion which will serve as example for others.

11 David Zincavage. BALT-L 6613. 3 May 1996.
13 "Fronda" Nr 6/1996.
Let me shortly analyse the role of the West and East in the messianic concept. West, especially Western Europe, is considered here as a beneficiary of Poland or more general of the whole Central and Eastern Europe. Let me quote Rafał Smoczyński, the editor of "Fronda":

"Not only Poland needs rapprochement with the European Union, also Western Europeans, so often suffering from lack of the sense of life, may need spiritually awakened Eastern Europeans."

The relation towards the East is also an interesting in this conception. Eastern Europe, and especially Russia becomes here not a classical enemy but rather a competitor. Russia is after all another nation famous for its messianic ideas popular especially among Slavophils. Tens of Russian authors wrote about "Russian Ideas" and special role Russia has to perform on the international scene. In their majority the Russian messianic concepts are created as justifications of Russian imperial ambitions and Russian hegemony over other nations. In this context we could remind ideas of panslavism, Russian leadership in the family of Slavic nations, which filled many Poles with disgust at any slogans containing the slightest reference to Polish Slavonic character. However some of the Russian messianic concepts, could be considered to have rather moral than political and imperial character. The most influential of contemporary Russian messianist is undoubtedly Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. Let me quote one of his thoughts:

"We have never had hope in the West and we should never have it in the future. (...) If the humankind will learn something from the 20th century, the lesson will be given by us to the West and not otherwise. Because of the too easy reached prosperity the will and reason have weakened in the West."

Thus Russia and Poland become the two main messianic rivals among Slavonic nations with ambitions of giving instruction to the whole Europe. In their different conceptions Poles and Russians exclude themselves in their missions or sometimes recognize their complementary roles. Vladimir Soloviov, the most famous of Russian philosophers of XIX century in his speech on Adam Mickiewicz, recognized the idea of suffering nation but reduced the Polish right to suffer only for redemption of its own sins, not of the other nations.

Thus in messianic visions, both Polish and Russians, the Eastern connections are most often recognized as valuable elements of national identity. One fundamental difference must be however underlined among Polish and Russian messianists. In Poland messianic concepts are most often used to underline the special role of Poland inside Europe, whereas in Russia they rather justify the independent position of the country outside Europe.

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14 Rafał Smoczyński, Czy żyjemy w pogańskim świecie?, "Życie" 8.10.1996.
6. Final remarks

The two above presented programs are revivals of old historical ideas. Although they may be not very representative in their form for popular Central European or even Polish identity, they seem to illustrate well the general problems facing the architects of national identities in the region.

These two examples could be of course followed by a very long list of other more or less original, more or less popular and more or less complex conceptions of national and regional identities. I could present examples of more self-critical approaches to own history and more decisively Euro-enthusiastic character. They, seemed however to me to be usually less original, and better known since presented by many of the influential Central European intellectuals.