

Jan Kieniewicz

The Eastern Frontier and the Borderland of Europe

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JAN KIENIEWICZ

The Eastern Frontier and the Borderland of Europe

In memory of Adam Żółtowski¹

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the problem of European frontiers ceased to exist. This is because they are no longer determined by a sense of European identity, but rather by a consensus reached in Brussels. The European borderlands disappeared generations ago and were substituted by peripheries of the capitalist world-economy.² It may be said that both concepts are of only academic interest. However, I am not convinced.

During a conference entitled: „Integrating the Options of Enlargement of the European Union to the East and the South in a Balanced European Architecture” (held in Leipzig on the 30th and 31st of January 1997) I presented a concept of the integration strategy based on the conscious process of reconstruction of borderland.³ Since then the enlargement of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union have taken place. However, little has changed. The Barcelona Process (the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) shows no signs of development. The vision of European Eastern policy following the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine has receded into the background. The idea of European solidarity is undergoing a crisis.⁴ We face the problem of terrorism.⁵ The approval of the European constitution is up in the air. As Frank Furedi highlights we are heading directly towards a second childhood.⁶

In this context the subject I propose may seem distant from reality because I am going to discuss a very long historical process. Its subjects are men and women, who were Europeans, i.e. people who choose a common set of values for many European cultures. I call these cultures European not only due to their geographical location, but also due to their

1 Adam Żółtowski (1881–1958), philosopher and my godfather, who I never met, was the author of *Border of Europe. A Study of the Polish Eastern Provinces*, London 1950.

2 I. Wallerstein, *The capitalist world-economy*, Cambridge 1979. Cf. A. G. Frank, *Immanuel and me without hyphen*, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, VI, 2, Summer/Fall 2000, 216–231.

3 J. Kieniewicz, *How to rebuild European Borderlands*, in: H. Elsenhans (ed.), *A balanced European Architecture. Enlargement of the European Union To Central Europe and the Mediterranean*, Paris 1999, 100–110.

4 P. Manent, *La raison des nations: Réflexions sur la démocratie en Europe*, Paris 2006.

5 M. Phillips, *Londonistan. How Britain is Creating a Terror Within*, London 2006.

6 *Globalizacja prowadzi do dzieciennienia*, interview with F. Furedi, in: *Europa*, Nr 10 (101), March 8, 2006.

civilizational belonging.⁷ I mean the state of mind of the people, who for several centuries have gradually been coming to the conclusion that their cultural heritage provides them with an additional bond to a supra-cultural set of ideas and principles. For European civilization is about a choice of a community and not about a type of super-system. More specifically, European civilization is not a sum of different cultures and the European cultures are not a result of an internal division of such civilizations. I am going to talk of Europe as a part of space, which is determined by axiological choice.⁸ In particular I am going to discuss the relations, which the Europeans develop in this space with a kind of "others" that we distinguish as "aliens".

My understanding of the notion of civilization is close to that of the definition by Koneczny.⁹ Civilization is about the manner, in which community life appears. I would add to this definition the assertion that this manner is determined by a system of values. In other words, people form social relationships through their cultures. However, they build their world from the values allowing them to answer the question how they should live. Since the mid-eighteenth century the notion of civilization has changed its meaning more than once and it is not my intention to enter a debate on the definition. I only intend to underline the fact that at this point in Europe people perceived some wider context, which only partially covers the notion of the "cultural area".¹⁰ The borders of the civilization were and still are never clearly defined. It is impossible to determine, how many inhabitants are required to, so to speak be able to, annex this space into Europe. Therefore, the borders of Europe were always essentially political. Within these frontiers men and women made their choices. Behind the frontiers of political entities and settlements, behind the religious and cultural borders I perceive a reality of a sense of civilizational belonging. I encompass in this notion a reality of making choices and shaping the values beyond the ethnic and cultural divisions. I assume that some sort of European identification is possible despite the obvious differences. The frontiers of Europe are determined by politicians, whereas the borders of the civilization are held in our hearts.

I bear in mind the choices made in favour of the values that we consider to be European values. Where do they come from? How do we find the way to access them? The first set of values was brought about by the Christendom. It is clear that all civilizations refer to religions, however, it is not always justified to identify the religion with values. It should be added that people always used to choose their values within the context of their cultures. And it is also true that those choices formed a set of role models, which are enriched by the experience of generations. Over a long period of time the European system of values was

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- 7 J. Kieniewicz, *Standing at the Door: Reading the Heritage and Choosing the Affiliation*, in: J. Purchla (ed.), *Central Europe. A New Dimension of Heritage*, Kraków 2003, 81–92; J. Kieniewicz, *Leer el patrimonio, escoger la filiación. El caso de Polonia en la Europa del Centro o del Este*, in: *Pensamiento y cultura*, no 5, Bogotá 2002, 87–96.
 - 8 E. Łukaszyk, *Terytorium a świat. Wyobrażeniowe konfiguracje przestrzeni w literaturze portugalskiej od schyłku średniowiecza do współczesności*, Cracow 2003, 16.
 - 9 F. Koneczny, *On the Plurality of Civilizations*, London 1962 (originally published 1935). His other essential works are only available in Polish, esp. *O ład w historii* (1948). Cf. A. Hilckman, *Feliks Koneczny und die Vergleichende Kulturwissenschaft*, in: *Saeculum*, Jg. 1952, H. 4.
 - 10 Cf. F. Braudel, *L'histoire des civilisations: le passé explique le présent*, in: F. Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Paris 1969, 255–314.

formed within the framework of *christianitas latina*. It took on the European form even before the Reformation and the collapse of the Roman Church. In its ability to form a *unitas multiplex* Europe created values, which went beyond those of Christendom.¹¹ This set of values formed the *Respublica Litteraria* and several other unconstitutional bonds. A human being gradually grows up with a set of values, in the family, in the Church, in the nation, but he develops by making choices and not by mechanical reception. What is more, from the exact same elements, humans are capable of creating their own individual forms of the world. Therefore, a set of values is constantly being extended, but in a different way to the establishment of a system of religion or ideology. The European system of values grows systematically wider and wider. With the passing of time it began to encompass the values contrary to Christian values and values created by men, such as equality, democracy, happiness and human rights. Other values undergo an evolution and take the form of new ideas. Thus, humans are capable of constructing their own variants of civilization. The assessment of others is not binding. However, it has significance in particular cases. When strong centres emerge, they may influence the assessments that humans make, which in turn may modify reality. For that reason I wish to focus on the phenomenon of the "borderland of civilization". As far as Europe is concerned this term refers to the territories, which are considered as „belonging to us", but open, i.e. the acceptance of the presence of aliens. That means that not only does it accept the material and spiritual imports, but it also allows the physical presence of people referring to other systems of values. The borderland emerges as a result of defence against people from other civilizations and our own expansion.

An obvious feature of the borderland is the multiplicity of identities, for example ethnic, cultural or religious identity. In such diversity a uniform political system project indicates a similar civilizational identity. This is the main reason, why we consider the frontiers of Europe not only in political terms. The openness of the borders means that within the limits of this space of common choice, people from other civilizations could be found. They are strangers, who have entered our space. In the same way aliens emerge, who inhabit the space we enter. The civilizational borderland is a space, in which our relations with the aliens develop. However, it is not a space-in-between or a no-man's-land. It is the reality of frequent border crossings. It is a phenomenon of many forms.

The history of Europe gives us diverse examples of these relations. During the last thousand years Europe has embarked on expansion and has been an object of expansion. It formed its borderlands as spaces exposed to pressures of foreign civilizations. By expanding towards aliens, it always used the same model of borderland. A differentiation between the civilizational borderland and the borderland civilization is not fully possible. Above all the borderland is a result of the confusion of roles and the simultaneous existence of own aggression with the defence against the aggression from others. The civilizational borderland combines these two realities as long as it maintains the consciousness of common values. I will define it in the following way: Men and women of different cultures, but

11 E. Morin, *Pensar Europa*, Barcelona 1988, 107–112, 158. Two different approaches to this essential problem: J. Fontana, *Europa ante el espejo*, Barcelona 1994 and D. Negro, *Lo que Europa debe al Cristianismo*, Madrid 2004.

adhering to one set of values show a capacity to maintain a dialogue.¹² However, if they come from different civilizations they are linked by contact, which is a multi-aspect form of civilizational oppression.¹³ However, it also happens that men and women, who make different choices and meet in the same space, stick to their own values. I call this situation an encounter. It is the most fascinating and the most precious experience of the borderland.

The examples of the civilizational borderland can be traced in the Iberian Peninsula during the *Reconquest* and to the Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian *Intermarium* between the Baltic and the Black Sea from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.¹⁴ My thesis is as follows: During the period, in which the European civilization or its modern day equivalent was being formed, different civilizational projects existed and were based on the same range of experiences of *christianitas latina*. In places, in which people were constantly confronted with aliens, particular or specific versions of the European civilization were likely to emerge. On the Iberian Peninsula the Spanish civilization was confronted with the Andalusian civilization.¹⁵ Later on and in completely different circumstances a civilizational project emerged, which was given the name Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.¹⁶ The fate of both projects was very different. The Spanish project gave birth to an Empire. The project called "the Europe in the East" fell apart when Poland proved to be no match for the power of Moscovy and then for the Russian expansion. As a result in 1795 the political frontier of Russia reached the Bug and Neman rivers and extended beyond Vistula and Warta rivers in 1815. However, it ought to be the subject of a separate study to determine to the extent in which the control of the Soviet Empire over the Central and Eastern Europe after 1945 was the continuation of the Russian expansion.

My objective is to question the relationship between the modification of the political frontiers and the retreat of borders of the European civilization. The two issues are united by the elimination of the borderland. I will initially deal with the influence that the modification of the border had on the elimination of borderland.

While the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth developed its European project, no one was interested in what existed beyond its limits. The frontier between Lithuania and Russia-Moscovy was not clear-cut and where the steppes stretched, the border remained symbolic. The Muslim world, which was pictured as the Crimean Tartars and the Ottoman Turks, was located in the south. The Poles alongside the Hungarians and the Austrians were deeply convinced that they formed the *Antemurale Christianitatis*.¹⁷ Furthermore, they earnestly

12 Unpublished paper, J. Kieniewicz, Is dialogue between civilizations possible?, International Conference "Dialogue among Civilizations – the Key to a Safe Future", Warszawa, 23.4.2003.

13 More or less similar to the concept of structural oppression, J. Staniszkis, *Władza globalizacji*, Warszawa 2003.

14 J. Kieniewicz, Del Báltico al mar Negro: 'Intermarium' en la política europea, in: *Política Exterior*, 61, XII – Enero/Febrero 1998, 59–73.

15 J. Kieniewicz, Andaluzja, Hiszpania i pogranicza cywilizacji: współczesna perspektywa historycznej konfrontacji, w: M. Koźmiński (ed.), *Cywilizacja europejska. Wykłady i eseje*, Warszawa, 2004, 79–90.

16 J. Kieniewicz, *Spotkania Wschodu*, Gdańsk 1999.

17 J. Tazbir, *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna*, Warszawa 1987.

believed that they formed a lively, significant and appreciated part of the Christian and European communities. They still harbour these illusions today.

While Europe was still in the process of making and implementing the Treaty of Westphalia, it began to acquire a new sense. As the Enlightenment started to build a new form of the European values, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was no longer a political entity. It became the object of political conflicts between France, the Habsburg Empire and finally Russia. In any case during the eighteenth century the Eastern frontier of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to be perceived as the border of Europe.

During the following hundred years an immense change took place. The Russian domination of Poland was replaced by the partitions. The Russian frontier advanced deep into the west. Through the Treaty of Vienna Russia imposed on the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland and expanded her rule beyond the Vistula River. Since then this frontier has remained the eastern border of Europe. The borderland no longer existed. The notion of the eastern border gradually became the expression of the conviction that there was a clearly determined unity known as the West.

The notion of the border requires the existence of a subject, which must define the space of its identity. The Eastern border was therefore an expression of the European consciousness and increasingly of Western consciousness. It was the notion of the West, which resolved the possible dilemma of people and territories in the East, which took a decreasingly European aspect. The more clearly Russia was perceived as a distinct civilization, the stronger the tendency to identify West with Europe. The European East eventually became a space of German-Russian confrontation. In any case, the eastern border was defined by the existence of the West.

The eastern border is therefore:

- A notion expressing the idea of the division of worlds, the differentiation between *Sarmatia Asiana* and *Sarmatia Europeana* from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century;
- The determination of the range of the Russian expansion between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries;
- A conviction of the existence of the European core, which took the form of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- A line separating the "Free World" from the sphere of the Soviet domination during the second half of the twentieth century;
- A concept of the range of the European Union between the Baltic and the Mediterranean Seas.

The borderland is a space, in which the European civilization enters into direct relations with other civilizations. The eastern borderland in this sense was eliminated during the period between the Congress of Vienna and the Treaty of Versailles. As a matter of fact the process of systematic elimination started as early as the eighteenth century as a result of the disappearance of the capacity for both expansion and reception. European civilization also retreated because the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to be capable of executing the tasks that it had undertaken. During the period following the First World War the Poles' conviction that they once again formed the borderland of the civilization was neither

recognised nor well justified. It was mainly due to the closed character of the frontier with the Soviet Union.

The borderland of the European civilization was a project created by the Poles, which may be acknowledged as a European project as long as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had the means to maintain its separate existence and independence. The situation dramatically changed, when the political frontiers were shifted and Poland lost her independence. In order to resist the Russian domination the Poles began emphasising their Western European identity. These claims were disputed between the eighteenth century and twentieth century, both by the Westerners and by the Russians. Additionally the former borderland became a space of violent confrontation between different ethnic, social and cultural groups. The battle for the Polish character of the *Kresy* region (a word meaning borderland and defining the territories east of the Kingdom of Poland from 1815)¹⁸ took on different aspects, but its character relating to the defence of civilization is widely disputed. From the European perspective the Polish efforts to maintain the community of values had no significance, if one takes into consideration the growing distance in all aspects of life. However, a people capable of taking part in the Western cultures and of living according to their own world despite the foreign domination remained in the borderland territories of the late Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Nevertheless, the majority of the population struggled to uphold the Polish culture by conserving the old structures and embarked on transformation, which could no longer be successfully applied.

In my opinion the *Kresy* region may be considered as a sort of borderland of the European civilization and as a part of the European space. This seems justified during the periods of both expansion and retreat. The abandoned inhabitants of the borderland began to lose their position in respect to the others (the Europeans, the inhabitants of the West), without forging their own identity (as those close to each other and identifying themselves together), they increasingly stressed the differences and were unwilling to give in, i.e. to abandon their choices. Their strategies clashed with the expansion of the Russian civilization, which basically meant that relationships between the communities that formally lived in a relative state of balance ended catastrophically.¹⁹

Therefore, the problem was reduced to the question to what extent people, who identified with the Polish culture and in that way formed part of the European civilization, considered themselves as belonging the region they lived, while their country no longer existed and their territories were inhabited by the followers of another faith, another culture and another outlook. To what extent did they perceive those inhabitants as strangers, i.e. as those who inhabited the space of another civilization. To what extent did the lack of political autonomy and the awakening of a national conflict overlap the conviction of the exclusive dimension of the Orthodox Church? What was the image of those people, who chose different sets of values, had about their coexistence on the same territory? This aspect

18 F. Gross, *Kresy. The Frontier of Eastern Europe*, in: *Polish Review*, 1987. The essential syntheses' of D. Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914*, Lublin 2005.

19 J. Kieniewicz, *Russia's Route*, in: A. Kukliński (ed.), *European Space, Baltic Space, Polish Space*, Warszawa 1996, 248–256.

suggests that the imagined reality of the *Kresy* region was estranged from the reality of life on the regions that had ceased to be the borderland.

From the Ukrainian perspective one can primarily see the domination of the Polish large property owners, however, the confrontation with them does not imply the rejection of Europe. The emerging Ukrainian national identity ruled out the Polish claims to represent Europe and increasingly looked to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy for a model.²⁰ In contrast the Russian point of view had been formed by the colonial situation, in which they could not accept the Polish aspirations to feel superior as Europeans. The military victories were accompanied by washing away the European character of the Polish community, which was indeed achieved without any major problems.

Of course, it remained an open question, what place in Europe did the Eastern territories under the rule of the governments of Vienna and Berlin occupy in the nineteenth century. It seems that the answer to this question is easy: the Grand Duchy of Poznań and Galicia were the peripheries of the European world-economy, and in both cases the way to Europe would probably lead to Germanisation. Both of these territories are not typical forms of borderland.

The national issue is considered the major problem of the nineteenth century. However, the national movements of the Central and Eastern Europe were not perceived as a testimony of their European character. Europe, in the era of its expansion, established its rule over the world and shaped such fundamental positions in the face of others, such as Orientalism and Colonialism. It is worth noting that it coincides with the reduction of the previously significant feature, such as the borderland. Even before 1914 Europe saw its frontiers retreat and accepted the identification with the West. An aspiration to determine, who would rule in the centre of Europe triggered the outbreak of both the First and Second World Wars. The future European Union could only emerge once the United States had consolidated the Eastern European frontier and prevented the Sovietization of the West. Never before had the eastern border been as solid as after the year 1945, when it started to separate the East and the West. Never before had Europe been so distant from the tradition of the borderland.

An obvious question emerges about the true character of the "Camp", i.e. of the part of the Soviet Union and the satellite states, which for their own part felt European, a betrayed and forgotten Europe.²¹ In reality the process of elimination of the European character proceeded without interruption and the local societies underwent a process, which bore a strong resemblance to a colonial situation.

The point I would like to make is the following. The European Union may restore the Eastern border much further east than it was in the nineteenth century. It is by no means obvious that the border should return to the same position it occupied in the seventeenth century. However, it should be taken into account that the essence of the European civilization is not determined by the location of its frontier, but by its character. All debate on this subject requires reflection on the civilization and not exclusively on the geo-politics.

The modification of the political frontier was never the exclusive and decisive factor for the change of the civilizational border. Nevertheless, it had huge significance. But there is another element, which proves decisive: it is the readiness and the capacity of the

20 O. Hnatiuk, *Pożegnanie z imperium. Ukraińskie dyskusje o tożsamości*, Lublin 2003.

21 J. Kieniewicz, *Yalta y el futuro de Europa*, in: *Política Exterior*, v. IX, no 44, 1995, 15–26.

inhabitants to make choices, which create a sense of belonging reaching beyond the ethnic, cultural, religious and political divisions. The European civilization is composed of people, who are convinced in their sense of belonging. There is no authority, which determines their exclusion. However, we can talk about the states of consciousness. The contemporary level of identification with the European civilization does not inspire much optimism.²² Therefore, the identification of the civilizational borders with the political frontiers is so unreliable.

The borderland is a more precise notion. It indicates the readiness and capacity of its inhabitants to encounter aliens, and as such with a different civilization. By meeting people, who live according to different values and by confronting ideas and messages about their difference. Until contemporary times the transfer of the civilization was linked to covering distances in the sense of covering territories. The borderland had a physical sense. In the global world people cross borders, fly over territories and global networks allow the exchange of information from all kinds of sources. It should encourage us to ponder over both the contemporary place of the borders and over the reestablishment of the borderlands of the European civilization.

The borderland used to offer an experience of the encounter with strangers and aliens. The particular character of the eastern borderland was due to reciprocal expansion. It took the form of crossing the borders without changing one's values. This state of balance was never perfect and was unsatisfactory. However, it allowed people to strengthen their identity by confronting it with other identities.

From the civilizational perspective the reconstruction of the borderland could be seen as an evidence of strength, which is of the vitality of the European system of values. The European expansion may be disputed because of some aspects of its history. However, the point is that if Europe is deprived of its system of values, we cannot expect a recovery of Europe. Lacking in its capacity of expansion, Europe will be unable to meet the challenges of the future. The capacity for expansion is one of its values and this simple conviction is sufficient. And this conviction is sufficient to reconstruct the borderland, because nowadays it is no longer the problem of the eastern frontier.

22 See J. Rifkin, *The European Dream. How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, New York 2004.