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[i]Provinciality in the construction of the Eastern European self-identity in Latvian media

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As the "Re-inventing Eastern Europe" conference is dedicated to discussion on the borders of Eastern Europe and the various aspects of their real and imaginative existence, the paper focuses on one of the phenomena accompanying identification and affecting it – the provinciality phenomenon. The experience of Latvia has been chosen for an empirical base. Theoretical literature on Eastern Europe and its history have been used for the cognition of provinciality. It is accompanied by a small attempt to reconstruct modern European identity and self-identification, based on Latvian media discourse, interviews and a modest survey of the student youth.

Key words: Eastern European identity, provinciality, Latvian media discourse, self-identification.

Any borders, whether realistic or imaginary, are accompanied by certain signification.. The sense and assessments assigned to borders and enclosures distinguish between attitudes and choices of recognizing, self-identifying, receiving them favorably or resisting and distinguishing themselves in the identification process.

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It should be acknowledged that Eastern Europe in the Baltic States and Latvia today is not viewed as a widely expanded and problematic discourse. National and European identity, in general, are more pressing than this. Consequently, the concept of Eastern Europe, particularly in the media, appears relatively rarely and mostly within the framework of the military strategy and NATO. However, indirect and often unconscious forms of provinciality can be seen and recognized as an important factor in enabling the identification process in all its inconsistency and complexity.

Provincialism is understood as the rational and emotional attitude towards Eastern Europe as the real and imagined periphery of the European metropolis and Western Europe. For the research of provinciality emotions and thinking, Eastern bloc countries have been chosen as they still are "dividing Europe along the lines of the former Iron Curtain." (Mrozik and Holubec 2018, 15)

The outskirts, peripheral attitudes towards Eastern Europe, have been formed historically, starting with the

ideas of the 18th century Western European Enlightenment, as the Larry Wolf suggests:

> "It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteen century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment, with its intellectual centers in Western Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of "civilization", an eighteen century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. Such was the invention of Easter Europe." (Wolff 1994, 4).

The term of the province, as it is known, was born historically much earlier in the Roman Empire, recognizing the spatial distance between the metropolis Rome and its many provinces used for the designation of administrative structure and organization. From a neutral administrative structure, it has become a hierarchically subordinate sign of a relatively higher and lower relationship. Differences between the center and the periphery are accompanied by a broad range of cognitive and affective attitudes that cannot be expressed in kilometers or miles, but in the different quality of politics, culture, media thinking.

Provincialism includes a variety of nuanced and diverse feelings of space and temporality. It refers to a spatial and time-limited, narrow, mostly self-directed, local way of thinking, isolated from relations with other nations, countries, world as a whole. At the same time, provinciality also includes a second paradoxically opposite trend – dependency on someone, a higher, more prosperous, more developed authority of a imagined and recognized center. Thus, provincial thinking and feelings are characterized not only with exaggerated self-isolation and self-sufficiency but also with a compensatory desire to align and imitate oneself with someone of the mainstream, leading recognized formations. Therefore, there is a special peripheral identity and self-identification.

Its design reveals either an unjustifiably inflated self-assessment or hidden feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem, accompanied by a heightened desire to constantly compare oneself and assimilate oneself to "center". Each reaction from the peripheral center is taken extremely heightened because, as Hannah Arendt writes, "there is no subject that also is not an object to someone else who would guarantee its 'objective' reality. The so-called self-awareness – the way we are aware of ourselves, and the way we appear to ourselves – that doesn't guarantee the realness." (Ārente 2000, 27-28). Self-awareness becomes a reality in action. A provincial attitude indicates the direction of choice in action - how to talk and re-present yourself and others, how to address, negotiate, how to build a transaction and what to expect from a counterparty, etc. Self-awareness influences the desire to belong, and its implementation in action provides more or less real set of provincial features.

Provinciality is the attitude of values. According to Aristotle, the value has a "motivational function and reliable success component" (Carter 2017, 3), so provinciality is important not only as of the influence and condition of beliefs but also as the direction of action. An appraisal is associated with appropriate behavior. Since provinciality is accompanied by mostly negative connotations, linking it with narrowness, exaggerated the glorification of yourself and your local neighborhood (umwelt), and unconscious adoration of an ideal central figure, it is accompanied by contradictory activities. On the one hand, getting attached to your local space and its dominance drives a heightened desire to preserve traditions and keep a constant tangible and intangible heritage. To reach a fertile balance between self-preservation and creative development is particularly difficult for regions and nations of former colonialism, as stated by Seamus Dean in the case of Ireland, when it „produced, in the first three decades of this century, a remarkable literature in which the attempt to overcome and replace the colonial experience by

something other, something that would be „native" and yet not provincial, was a dynamic and central energy." (Deane 1990, 3). On the other hand, provinciality leads to an exaggerated, increased tendency to identify with a more hierarchically advanced and modern center, such as art, fashion or lifestyle, etc.

Defending local and parochial may not be linked to and identified as provinciality. It is necessary to save an identity during the globalism and it is a condition for a fertile and vital self-development. It becomes provincial in the process of seclusion and self-isolation. Provincial pride in one's city can be expressed, for example, by creating a stereotype about Riga or Baku as a little Paris, or by seeing Goethe's "Faust" translation in native language as superior to the original. Pride in the local environment become provincial when overstated self-glorification takes place by trying to align oneself with the imaginary authority of a highly developed center without seeing the decline in self-worth.

According to former Latvian Minister of Culture Voldemars Kalpiņš, provincialism delays and exaggerates. An excessive urge, often dictated by uninformed and insufficient self-esteem, to keep up with the authority of a center is often accompanied by an increased tendency to imitate. The concept of mimicry, taken from biology and ecology, highlights the result of imitation and alignment which is the loss of one's identity and the gain of an identity that suits better for surviving. In Lithuania's politics, culture and thinking, the concept of mimicry has once been analyzed by Rasa Baločkaite, not without bitter irony:

> „To the "western consciousness", Lithuania's position represents something that lies beyond the limits of rationality; it is ungoverned by reason, but yields to naive sentiments. Yet how can legitimacy and recognition be gained? Via self-renunciation and rejection – authentic experience, sentiments, wrongs, feelings and convictions are suppressed and silenced, giving way to mimicry. A deep inner wish to be accepted and recognized results in the enthusiastic mimicking of western fashion, lifestyle, daily habits, values, ideas, and political language." (Balockaite, 2008)

The rector of the Latvian Academy of Arts, Kristaps Zariņš, has also acknowledged imitation and adaptation to the mainstream in the arts while pointing to the strategy of independent creativity and its desirability:

> "You should not try to resemble something that is already in ten other countries. You have to be to be able to highlight your uniqueness. Even if it seems like you have to run after the train, you should never do it. What is happening in the world needs to be evaluated critically, but it is also necessary to preserve things that do not exist elsewhere. Very often, the scene of modern art tends to copy the West and treat it as a good practice. I think it's provincial thinking. I think it's the exact opposite: here can create something like nowhere else." (Zariņš 2019. 4)

Provincial attitudes include both rationally analytical and emotionally sensible judgment, combining rational and emotional in a unified integrated disposition. It forms an attitude and appreciation for the nation, country, regional creations, etc. - benevolent, proud, self-aware, ironic, disdainful, arrogant, critical, complaining, cautiously restrained, etc.

It is not difficult to see that the self-identification of the Baltic States and Latvia is historically shaped in the context of Western Europe and in comparison to it. The characteristics of provinciality are the result of a lack of homogeneity in the regions' development process and its inclusion in construction, invention, assessments and attitudes which, in the case of Eastern Europe, both sides have participated – the side which is historically known as

the West, thus countering itself to the barbaric east (Wolff, 1994), and the East which had accepted their alleged distance without any particular objection.

Perhaps it is the traumatic colonial past, the notion of Eastern Europe as a part that is related to the outskirts and provinciality of Europe, in a small survey of students (eighty-three 19-20-year-olds) shows the avoidance of belonging to Eastern Europe. Only 5 of them recognize themselves as Eastern Europeans. Most are willing to recognize the identity of Northern Europe or Europe. The northern orientation is also formally expressed in the strategic development programs and speeches of Latvian politicians.

Eastern Europe's ties to Western Europe have an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, the values of freedom and democracy recognized and developed in Western Europe's philosophy and culture have indeed served as an inspiring incentive for liberation for many Eastern European countries over the centuries, as well as by breaking the walls of half-century-long socialism built during the Cold War after the Second World War, getting into the dependency of the totalitarianism of the USSR. Historically, European magnetism for the Baltic and other nations is associated with the inspiring values of freedom, justice, liberal individualism, rational thinking, well-being and other idealizations. These values have served as an incentive for liberation, not only for the Baltic States, but for many countries in the former Eastern bloc. This persistency of protest and resistance can be seen in the fall of the Berlin Wall, which has been encouraged by Gdańsk Shipyard workers of the Solidarnostj Movement, the singing revolutionaries of the Baltic States, who joined their hands to form a human chain in the Baltic Way, the signatories of the Czech Charter 77 in Prague, the participants of the Candle demonstrations in Bratislava, etc.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the new EU countries come with the traumatic experience of colonial dependency and Soviet totalitarianism, which, to some extent, remains deformed in the inertia of dependency and the desire to align itself with the historic Western European ideal. Provinciality, as an adjunct to identity and self-identification, is important for Eastern Europe's choice-and-action cognition and as forecasts for participation in the functioning of the European Union (Ceka and Sojka, 2016). On the one hand, there is the satisfaction and pride of political and organizational affiliation with Europe, on the other hand – there is also concerns and suspicion of dependency on EU legislative dictates and the loss of national identity, which does not erase the differences between the West Centre and the outskirts of the East.

In the 30 years following the collapse of the USSR, the liberation of Eastern Europe, and in particular the enlargement of the European Union towards the East, the differences between the outskirts and center are gradually decreasing. Symptomatic is the article by the publicist, Jakob Mikanovskis, entitled "Goodbye Eastern Europe!", in the Latvian intellectual journal "Rīgas Laiks". It nostalgically mentions a statement regarding the gradual disappearance of Eastern Europe due to the historical separation of "occupation and exclusion" experiences and the increase in economic prosperity (Mikanovskis, 2017, 14). At the same time, the author notes: "Now that the alienation of Eastern Europe has stepped in front of the homogenizing forces of globalization and prosperity, this region is gradually plunging into oblivion." (Ibid, 14). The fact that the name of Eastern Europe is gradually declining in Latvian media is supported by the publications of the leading online news portal Delfi. Over the last year, news headlines mentioning 'Eastern Europe' only appear three times and, in all cases, as differentiation in relation to Western Europe. In the context of discrimination in Eastern Europe, it is mentioned by the Member of the

European Parliament, Professor of Politology of the University of Latvia, Ivars Ījabs (Delfi, 2019), as a support of the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen as Chair of the European Commission, while pointing to the low presence of Eastern European representatives in the leading institutes of the European Union. The two times Eastern European is used as a term is in the article about the still-underdeveloped Latvian investment strategy and market, which has not enough environmentally friendly packaging materials. All articles still match traumatic notions of Eastern Europe as province and outskirts.

The desire to identify with Northern Europe is also understandable due to other historical circumstances:

> "Both the status of the former Soviet republic and, to a lesser extent, the status of the Eastern European state in the eyes of many Western nations and investors is associated with a poverty, crime and political instability. Meanwhile, Northern Europe, traditionally associated with five Nordic countries, is one of the richest and most developed regions in the world, providing itself with the completely different attitudes from the investors.´ (Sedlenieks, 2017).

In the survey of students, young people avoid self-identification with Eastern Europe, acknowledging the provinciality of Eastern Europe, whether it is in our minds, a "construct, or geographically, historically, politically established outskirts. Provinciality preserves the notion of outskirts and distance geographically, politically and culturally, dependency on something, having an influence from the "environment and surroundings", the backwardness when "left behind the great Europe", with "reluctance to seek something new", with a stillness in development and a strong accustomed attitude towards the old ways. Provincial is also understood as not following the world's events. Some students also understand provinciality as the backwardness of the urban environment (7). In theory, it is consistent with the concept of Benedict Anderson & Ruchira Mendiones double provincialism. (Anderson and Ruchira,1985). For Eastern Europe, which is "another Europe" Latvian students and interviewed media specialists attribute not only backwardness but also positive values such as the fight for freedom, vitality and potency, which stems from the status as a new European country in the European Union. Students and elderly scientists who were interviewed are generally prepared to recognize their membership, not in northern Europe, but in Europe overall, without partitioning it into individual regions. In the survey's replies, Eastern Europe is recognized as a natural region of greater diversity, with a historical and present struggle for independence, with hospitality and kindness (1). There is a slight shade of old-fashioned rusticity, a peace that is anticipated for the modern, rushing man (rural peace when the pace is slower).

The notion of Eastern Europe in Latvia has a dynamic, diverse and transformative nature, in which the avoidance of identification with Eastern Europe cannot be explained as much with the "disappearance of Eastern Europe" in general, as with the desire to get rid of the experience of traumatic socialism, to which the link with post-communist Eastern Europe points out. And although at the end of 20th century Larry Wolff, the researcher of Eastern Europe the invention suggests to "rethink our mental maps of Europe" (Wolff 1994, 372), it is not easy, not only because of external positioning but also because of internal self-positioning, in which provinciality feelings play a certain role.

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