Polish Stereotypes of the East: Old and New Mechanisms of Orientalisation in the Regional and Transnational Dimensions

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Introduction

The primary goal of this chapter is to undertake a critical survey of imaginaries which can be collectively termed as Polish discourses of "the East." These include what I propose to call the "internal East" (located within the boundaries of present-day Poland and thus making up discourses of eastern Poland), and the "external East" (meaning that which is located outside the current borders of the Polish state). I would like to look at these discourses in connection with a broader perspective of Poland as an eastern country from the vantage point of the territories of the European core because there are reasons to venture a hypothesis that the way in which the East is imagined in Poland, both the eastern parts of the country and the territories located to the east of Poland, is to a large degree premised on the discursive framework generated in the European core and used to describe Poland itself as well as other states in this part

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S. Huigen and D. Kołodziejczyk (eds.), *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century*,
Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17487-2_3

of Europe as immanently "eastern" in the negative, Orientalising sense of the word (Zarycki 2004). In both cases, we deal with discourses whose foundations, as many observers point out, can be related to the paradigm of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said (1978). What is at stake, then, is the stereotype of the East as a territory and a social world fundamentally different from the West, a territory perennially backward both in economic and "civilisational" dimensions. Additionally, this territory is simultaneously dangerous and unpredictable, torn by irrational emotions manifested in religious or cultural tensions or in ethnic and national divisions. This affective charge is often seen as the most characteristic feature of the inhabitants of what Said delineates as the Orient (Said 1978, 300–301). This chapter, while it mostly builds on findings from the author's previous studies, in particular *Ideologies of Eastness* (Zarycki 2014), adds a new dimension to interpretations of the discourses under investigation. Namely, it points to the role of what can be called culturalism. Culturalism, and its close counterpart—psychologism, can be seen as permeating all the Polish discourses about the broadly understood East. This chapter proposes a definition of culturalism as a generator of Eastness and explains the primary mechanisms and goals it serves, including legitimisation of reproduction of social, economic, and political inequities.

As many experts in the field point out, Orientalism relating to the regions of East Central and Eastern Europe has more blurred contours than Orientalism relating to the Middle East, where the western images of that region are based on binary divisions. East Central Europe, as well as South Eastern Europe and the Balkan peninsula in particular, as Maria Todorova demonstrated in her *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997), are perceived not so much as a world totally different from the West, but, rather, as a space gradually growing in separateness, lesserness, and wildness. The blurred border between Western Europe and the other "Europes," especially East Central and South Eastern Europe, gives rise to many interesting phenomena which I have tracked in course of my research project.[1] Especially noteworthy is that the status and symbolic hierarchy of European space becomes covert due to the ambiguities of division dominating at present (Best 2007). Within the European

[1] The research project on which this text is based has been conducted at the Institute of Social Studies of the University of Warsaw and was entitled "Critical analysis of the Polish discourses on 'the East'," financed by the National Science Center of Poland, NCN (Project no. 4264/B/H03/2009/37).

Union, discourses of spatial, political, and economic integration dominate, suggesting the disappearance of borders and spatial hierarchies. At the same time, valorisations of territories as "better" because they are more "western" and "worse" because they are more "eastern" are carried out on a range of more covert and naturalised levels (Böröcz 2006). Their distinctive feature is that of multi-tiered structure and fractality. What this means in practice is that there is a tendency to transfer one's "Eastness," felt as a stigma, onto variously defined, more eastern, neighbours. The tendency may take the form of an Orientalising chain in which it is often difficult to detect the beginning and the end (Bakić-Hayden 1995). The fractality of Orientalisation, in turn, is revealed in going down through the layers: from the continental level with its division into Western and Eastern Europe, through state and regional levels, down to the local level, where even parts of a city located on the other (eastern) bank of a river (Straughn 2005) can be stigmatised, like the Praga district in Warsaw.

Orientalism and the Dimensions of Dependency in the Eastern Peripheries of Europe

We can assume that a thus defined critical analysis of discourses of the East in Poland most probably indicates broader mechanisms of contemporary knowledge production about the social world. In particular, it may refer to links between various dimensions of domination and dependence, of which three basic ones are discerned from Stein Rokkan, in the analysis of centre-periphery relations: economic, political-state-legal, and cultural (Rokkan 1980). Depending on the context, each of these dimensions (in Bourdieu's language, "fields", Bourdieu 1986) has its own sphere of autonomy. We cannot, therefore, categorise domination in one dimension (e.g. political or economic) with domination in another (e.g. cultural). However, we can trace their interdependence. One of the hypotheses presented here is that a large part of the Orientalising images of the East in Polish discourses has a distinctive functionality stemming from political and economic dependency on higher-level centres (Böröcz 2006). That is, their stereotypes may be seen as playing a legitimising role from the point of view of what can be called the political economy of centre-periphery relations, both on a national and an international scale. This claim can be supported by an observation that a lot of these images contain a range of features which allow the regions or countries making up "the East" to be treated as "backward" due to a large degree at least,

to their own negligence or actions. The key mechanisms for ascribing responsibility to regions for their position in economic and political hierarchies include culturalist, psychological, and historical rhetoric (Zarycki 2010). It is worth pointing out that these rhetorical practices are also frequent in the public sphere, especially in the media, but also in the language of state institutions, especially in central and local government reports.

Culturalism, as understood here, attributes particular sets of cultural features, traditions and patterns of self-organisation to the inhabitants of eastern peripheral regions, which allegedly translates into the meagre economic efficiency of these regions. Culturalism is linked to psychologism, understood here as a way of perceiving characteristics of communities through a psychological or psychologising lens, in particular, in referring to them as "attitudes" (mostly negative, e.g. as a lack of trust in or "openness" to "innovations"), "mentality" (e.g. the postcommunist mentality, a well-known example of which is *homo sovieticus*), or psychological orientations (e.g. authoritarian or conservative), which are supposedly reproduced in the transfer of cultural traditions. In the case of peripheral regions, these psychological features attributed to regional communities have, more often than not, a negative import. Also, they are often connected with Orientalist patterns. These discourses are reinforced by historicism, which operates by representing these cultural and psychological features as reproducing themselves in *longue durée* processes (Domański 2004). These discourses often lead to explaining the relatively lower level of economic development in comparison with western states or central regions as caused by the endemic lack of skills or determination of the inhabitants of these regions to change their psychological disposition or culturally defined habits, which are represented as key obstacles to development. Such approaches assume that inverting negative economic tendencies would be a relatively simple process, requiring mainly some psychological and cultural changes, whose success would chiefly be warranted by the will of the local communities. The lack of such a will to change, and a willingness to "work through" one's cultural, psychological, or historical problems, to reverse cultural patterns that have been replicated for generations, is directly or indirectly represented as evidence of the responsibility of these regions for their dire material condition. In the case of regions that are of interest to us in this chapter, they are often ascribed some kind of an "eastern mentality" understood as, amongst others, an insufficient mastering of western

civilisational standards. In the case of Poland, it is often also accounted for as the communist legacy, although some interpretations reach back to the nineteenth century, when the country was partitioned between three European empires (Zarycki 2007).

As can be proven on the basis of many examples, these popular (in the disciplinary and statistical sense) interpretations are characterised by a range of specific features which can turn them into useful tools of domination for stronger (central) regions over those more peripheral ones. In particular, they deliver a vision of the world where economic and political inequalities turn out to be natural because they are culturally, psychologically, and historically justified, as well as being rooted in the alleged lack of determination of the population of these peripheral regions to change these historically entrenched attitudes, thus blocking the possibility of progress. An important feature of these interpretations is that they ignore broader, supra-national mechanisms of dependence between regions, countries, and other spatially defined subjects (Cumbers et al. 2003). These dependencies do not have to be understood solely as one-sided, because even very weak peripheries can affect the centre. It is, however, worth tracking these asymmetries, and this is something which is particularly rare in discourses on the eastern regions. The above-mentioned popular mainstream interpretations are also often devoid of an analysis of the relation between the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of dependency mentioned above. Likewise, they often tend to ignore the fact not only of the cultural traditions that reproduce themselves in the historical *longue durée*, but of the economic and political dependencies that are also subject to such reproductions. In fact, they rarely consider the possibility that these dimensions play a key role in supporting the processes of the historical *longue durée*.

The ambiguity of dependency can be convincingly illustrated using the example of the conditions for the functioning and reproduction of Orientalist stereotypes. In his classic work on the development of the negative image of Eastern Europe, *The Invention of Europe*, Larry Wolff (1994) postulates that it was created in the Enlightenment period and has been reproduced until now by the force of cultural inertia. The lasting circulation of some stereotypical elements of the image of Eastern Europe for the last 300 years indeed shows a range of observable trends. They include a vision of a savage peasant element, as well as a lack of self-discipline and self-organising skills in Eastern European communities. It is also worth noting that these stereotypes do not persist in unchangeable forms but

are subject to periodic reactivation or fading. These periods can be linked to changes in economic and political relations between particular regions and states. Atilla Melegh, in his fundamental work *On the East–West slope: Globalization, narration, racism, and discourses on Central and Eastern Europe* (Melegh 2006), elucidated how the stereotype of "backward" Eastern Europe would wax with the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Melegh, 1968 was a crucial year in resuscitating this stereotype—this was when the Warsaw Pact military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 undermined the prestige of the Soviet Union in a critical and irreversible way. The image of the USSR as a modern state, albeit seeking progress via an alternative path of socialism, was gone beyond repair. In the circles of the Western European left, communism started to lose its aura of an attractive emancipatory ideology. The real symbolic crisis of Eastern and East Central Europe deepened in the 80s, additionally linked with the steadily worsening economic condition of the Eastern Bloc. The fall of communism took place already within the context of the dominating image of Eastern Europe as a backward, culturally inferior region, additionally destroyed by communism, which reinforced the negative demeanour allegedly endemic to the communities in this part of the continent for centuries. In this context, the only way to achieve effective modernisation and development seemed to be by adopting western cultural, organisational, and political models, as they appeared indisputably superior to communist or other, native, models. It is worth noting that a similar dynamic of images can be observed on the level of regional narratives. This concerns, most of all, eastern Poland, which from the last decades of the communist period till now has been more often than not represented as backward due to its cultural conditioning (Kukliński 2010; Gorzelak and Jałowiecki 2010; Zarycki 2010). Rural areas in other parts of Poland are likewise subject to this dynamic, especially in regions based predominantly on collective state farms whose employees, often jobless in the course of transition, were often stigmatised as being orientalised and unable to cope with change (Buchowski 2006).

Relying on the categories coined by Stein Rokkan (1980), we could venture a thesis that the region of eastern Poland (similarly to the whole country, but on a higher level) changed its status from interface periphery (the space of criss-crossing influences of two or more external centres) to the status of external periphery, which means, a marginalised one. Simultaneously, processes of economic integration with Europe and the

proximity to Germany were key factors stimulating growth in the western part of the country. The closing of the border required by the Schengen treaty and the cooling down of political relations with Poland's eastern neighbours had a palpably negative effect on eastern Poland, which became much less attractive for investors, and as a result its political role rapidly diminished (Zarycki 2011). We can therefore suspect that there is a correlation between economic and political depreciation of the region in the current geopolitical framework and the region's hegemonic images, which are seriously burdened with Orientalist stereotypes. We can also find solid premises for stating that Larry Wolff's thesis about the inert lasting of stereotypes engendered in the Enlightenment seems to be grounded in a serious simplification and can be challenged by instances when the negative image of Eastern Europe was fading in definite historical periods. These were mainly periods of the most dynamic development of the Russian Empire. For example, we can observe a significant decrease or even disappearance of Orientalising narrations on Russia in the period of the Russian campaign against Napoleon (Maxwell 2011), or in the last years before the 1917 revolution, when Russia experienced an unprecedented economic boom (Zarycki 2012). We could, thus, venture a more general hypothesis that the force of orientalising stereotypes of Eastern Europe as such, and, subsequently, its sub-regions and states, is regulated to a large degree by the relation of inverse proportions between the strength and condition of the state-economic systems in regions that would be able to challenge the force of domination of the western core of the continent and generate their own, competitive narrative aspiring to the universalist status. Thus, the stereotypes get stronger and more pervasive when the region does not fare well, and they decrease or fade when the region's condition improves.

Modern history notes at least three such periods. The first was the time of the peak power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Its gradual disintegration, which coincided with the onset of the Enlightenment and the blooming of its new visions of the world, brought about the emergence of the Orientalist discourses that Larry Wolff discusses. The second such period was the time of the Russian Empire with its periods of economic and cultural upturn, the first at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the other at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century. The apogee of USSR power can be considered the third such period, when the Soviet Union was one of the two poles of world order, and communism seemed to be an alternative ideological option to

capitalism. Its slow demise, which started in the 1970s and ended in the 1990s, resulted in a major symbolic crisis for the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe. One of the initial manifestations of this crisis was the attempt to bring back to life the project of "Central Europe" by intellectuals who entered the path of opposition against communist regimes in the 80s. The most famous of these counter-communist images was authored by Milan Kundera in his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (Kundera 1984), where he develops a narrative of Central Europe being kidnapped by the Soviet Union.

There is a lack of strong competitive centres of growth that could be compared to those I have enumerated above. In particular, Russia remains a relatively weak state in comparison to the biggest world powers, both in an economic and a cultural dimension. Consequently, in identity discourses in the whole region broadly understood as East Central Europe, we can observe a tendency to disavow the variously understood term "Eastness." Especially unpopular are any references to the past, both in the media as well as in academic discourses, which would represent relations with Russia. This trend is particularly visible in the area of Eastern Poland that was under the Russian administration until 1918. It is this period of the Russian partition that is blamed for being a key factor in determining both the economic problems of eastern Poland that have endured until now, as well as causing its social and cultural problems. The influences of the Prussian or Austrian (Habsburg) partitions are mostly assessed as having been much less harmful than the Russian rule, and sometimes as even having some positive aspects (Zarycki 2007). The memory of the positive aspects of economic growth in that part of Poland which was under the Russian administration until 1918 is usually marginalised. The dominant negative image of the Russian "legacy" understood as a factor allegedly determining contemporary economic processes can be, it would seem, linked to the already mentioned low status of Russia in contemporary economic, political, and symbolic hierarchies, and, especially, the negative image of Russia in Polish identity discourses. By comparison, the image of contemporary Germany and Austria is, on the contrary, positive. The two countries are amongst the dominating players in Western Europe, whose economic, political, and cultural position is very high at present. German and Austrian companies control a considerable portion of former communist states' economies (Drahokoupil 2009), which visibly influences the directions in which cultural and intellectual innovations are diffused, as well as interpretations

of patterns of social organisation which are usually based on assumptions that the cultures of less developed regions and countries are likewise backward. Altogether, they seem to positively affect the evaluation of the past of the regions which had been under the control of Germany and Austria. The historical memory of nineteenth century heritage, in effect, creates useful cultural capital, allowing for a symbolic advancement and legitimation of relative bonuses stemming from the geopolitical and economic situation that benefited some regions in particular (Zarycki 2014).

Postcolonial Approaches to Polish Discourses of the East and Borderlands Ideologies[2]

The unequal value of historical narratives oriented towards relations with eastern and western neighbours is also visible in the ways in which various actors in our part of Europe employ postcolonial theory. We can trace interesting patterns here. Two main ways of applying postcolonial theory dominate in Polish discourses, and they function in connection with the structure of the Polish political scene. On the one hand, we can discern interpretations which depart from a stance that Poland should be considered a postcolonial country due to the historical fact of the Russian domination, and Soviet domination in particular. On the other hand, we can discern interpretations whose pivotal point is the experience of Polish domination in the eastern territories during the First Commonwealth and the interwar period. There are authors who combine both these approaches, like, for example, the pioneer in this field, Clare Cavanagh, author of "Postcolonial Poland" (Cavanagh 2004), which launched the postcolonial discussion in Poland. Most of such postcolonial references are located within either of these two paradigms. The first one is well represented by Ewa Thompson and her already classic *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Thompson 2000), focusing on Russian imperialism along the lines of Saidian Orientalism, while the other paradigm can be exemplified by Jan Sowa and his *Fantomowe ciało króla* [The King's Phantom Body] (Sowa 2011), examining the long-term effects of Poland's imperial presence in the east. These two trends

[2] "Borderlands" with a capital B refers to "kresy"—the eastern territories in Poland which, after the World War II border shifts, became part of the USSR. In contrast, "borderlands" refers to contemporary discourses of border zones in Poland.

in postcolonial applications have developed a network of complex assumptions and implications. They are linked, though, in that they both either minimise or totally ignore the possibility of recognising Western European subjects as agents in what can be seen as the colonial dependency of Poland.[3] This means that even if they critically assess the dependence of the region from the West, they usually put the blame on their compatriots, invariably finding fault in representatives of the opposite political or ideological option. Within this pattern, then, the conservatives charge the liberals with a passive or even cynical surrendering to western fads and norms, with the effect of deepening their countries' dependency on the West. Such "surrendering" could be called, after Alexander Kiossev (1999), self-colonisation, or, after Ewa Thompson (2007), it can be seen as a wilful adoption of dependency from the West, which has the role of "surrogate hegemon" (whose operation is, first of all, ambiguous). On the opposite pole, the representatives of liberal and left-wing circles put the blame for the dependency of their countries on the western core on native conservatives who, with their provincial traditionalism, block economic and social progress. It is worth noticing that neither of these polarised stances considers the possibility of an interpretation that would indicate and argue, based on the world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974–1989), that we are dealing rather with an objectively existing and deeply embedded structural dependency, and changing it, either through liberal or through conservative, or by any other very radical politics, would still not yield results in the short term. We can only suspect that one of the reasons why research in Poland does not seem to endorse an approach inspired by the world-systems theory is that it would likely undermine the "European" identity of Poland itself, suggesting at the same time its peripherality. Such assumptions are unacceptable in the current social and political context, and underlining the innate Europeanness of Poland seems to be the priority of all identity discourses, regardless of their political orientation. The push towards European integration and defence against threats from the East, which are commonly considered the most realistic today, makes it difficult to investigate and

[3] One can note that besides these two dominant trends in the application of postcolonial theory, one can point to a number of studies focusing on Western, and in particular German, colonialism in Poland (e.g. Surynt 2007 or Orłowski 1996). These works, however, do not shape the mainstream debate in Poland, just as those published abroad with similar applications of postcolonial theory do not.

discuss the mechanisms and genealogies of Poland's dependence on the western core of the continent. In contrast, these dependencies are willingly researched in western academia (e.g. Böröcz and Sarkar 2005; Böröcz 2012; Drahokoupil 2009; Kuus 2004).

The two polarised paradigms of deploying postcolonial theory also determine the two decidedly opposite discourses of the "Polish East." In the conservative paradigm, which sees Russia and the Soviet Union as the main coloniser, the eastern territories, especially those that were within the boundaries of the Polish state prior to the World War II, are treated as lands annexed by the USSR and subjected to effective colonisation. They are mostly referred to as *Kresy* (the Borderlands), although the borders delineating these territories are variously defined. Within this framework, Poland in its entirety is often regarded as a postcolonial country, whose numerous weaknesses today should be interpreted as lingering consequences of Russian and Soviet colonisation (e.g. Krasnodębski 2006; Skórczewski 2007; Thompson 2007). Polish identity can from this perspective appear to derive from the visions of Poland as the "borderland of Europe." Within the broad spectrum of visions under the conservative umbrella, the common set of features uniting them includes: the insistence on Europeanness premised in the conservative paradigm of Christian values, on defence against an external other, often defined as non-Christian and specifically as non-Catholic or Protestant, on heroism, sacrifice for the larger community and so on. The period of communism, defined as the embodiment of evil and eastern barbarity, is treated within this paradigm as an experience of a particular kind—destructive in the material and human sense, but morally strengthening both the Borderlands (that is mostly contemporary eastern Poland, but also Poles who remained beyond the eastern border) as a region and Poland as the borderland of Europe. Ultimately, then, resistance to it was rewarded with success. At the same time, this paradigm fosters a specific borderland vision of countries neighbouring Poland and Poland itself, made unique by its wild nature, exotic culture, and deep spirituality boosted, by the beauty of its women and its famous hospitality, unknown in the West.

In the opposite paradigm, which we can provisionally label liberal, the same region appears to be the victim of Polish colonising domination, specifically wielded by the First Commonwealth, then the Second Commonwealth (the pre-war period) and sustained by the Polish landowners in the region. In this perspective, Poland functions as an

agent, or subcontractor, of European colonialism. The Polish presence in the East is represented as the period of economic oppression (primarily of the non-Polish peasants by the Polish nobility), political oppression (no rights for those who did not belong to the nobility), cultural oppression in the form of Polonisation, and religious oppression (the domination of Catholicism) (e.g. Beauvois 2006; Ritz 2008; Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012; Sowa 2011; Szulecki 2010). Adherents to the liberal paradigm tend to be sceptical about using the term *Kresy* (Borderlands) in the first place. They argue that the term itself functions as a tool of "symbolic appropriation" of these territories, since it is inherently Polish, Polonocentric and rejected by most contemporary representatives of the territories in question.

When analysed in contrast, these two paradigms yield an interesting set of conclusions as well as interpretative and practical recommendations. The desired form of decolonisation according to the conservative paradigm will first and foremost mean an effort to restore the memory of the Polish presence to these territories in Poland, or, at least, to valorise the memory of the First Commonwealth, the statehood of which these territories made up such a crucial part and that in today's conservative discourses is so intensively idealised.[4] Depending on the political affinity and world-views of particular authors, such a restoration of Polishness may take on various forms, from purely intellectual work mostly in Poland to more palpable actions, including support for the Polish minority in these territories. It can be both Polonocentric or oriented towards recreating the supra-national civic political culture of the Commonwealth of Both Nations (1569–1795).[5] In the liberal paradigm, decolonisation will take the opposite direction—to delimit the role or relativise Polish influences in these territories. It can also take various forms, from an

[4] One should remember here that references to the Borderlands (*Kresy*) in the public sphere were forbidden in the communist period. Poles expelled from these territories not only lost all their property but were usually not allowed to visit this part of the Soviet Union until the last years of its existence. At the same time, the official historiography, in particular school textbooks, presented a very critical vision of the Polish statehood in that region and of the Polish nobility's social status in general.

[5] Formally the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, after 1791 the Commonwealth of Poland, was a dualistic state, a bi-confederation of Poland and Lithuania ruled by a common monarch, who was both the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania.

ideological critique of "Borderlands (*Kresy)* discourses" to more practical action, including support for non-Polish, primarily native national cultures of the contemporary states in the region, or openness towards interpretations which put the Polish presence there in the past in a critical perspective, also from a non-Polish vantage point. The common feature of both approaches will be an unwillingness to include Russian voices into the narratives on these territories. As we may expect, for the conservative voices, Russia will more often than not play the role of the negative significant Other, whose influence and the trace thereof should be eliminated, while in liberal discourses it will be most often, although not always, simply ignored. The latter, in turn, will privilege the voices of the representatives of "titular" states neighbouring Poland, as well as former or contemporary minorities, like Jewish, Roma, or Armenian people.

It is worth noting that even though the conservative paradigm represents, according to the liberal paradigm, national ideology in its imperial mantle, in its own understanding it is rather an attempt to establish a certain model of inclusive universalism. Within this paradigm, the Borderlands (*Kresy*) are usually defined as a period of thriving, multicultural, open, and tolerant European communities (Hadaczek 2011). Liberal critique challenges these visions of the past as Polish myths. One of the most fervent critics of this alleged mythology is the French historian Daniel Beauvois (Beauvois 1994, 2003) who argues that the actual historical record of Polish rule over the region in the seventeenth or eighteenth century is burdened with so many injustices that it does not allow consideration of the heritage of the Borderlands (*Kresy*) as a positive point of reference. The struggle against these myths is becoming a crucial element of de-imperialisation of Polish national identity within the liberal paradigm. In this approach, emancipation of the East would probably mean, first and foremost, freeing it from influences and discursive appropriations by Poland and Russia and handing it to the liberal and pro-European elites of the respective national states in this region. Therefore, we can speak here about two competing universalisms in relation to the Polish propositions regarding the "East." Conservative universalism is founded on the myth of the First Commonwealth as a multicultural space of tolerance, freedom, especially religious freedom, mutual inspiration, and cooperation. Liberal universalism, as can been inferred from its representative texts, is founded on the contemporary European myth, embodied by the European Union. The horizon of emancipation for the eastern part of Europe is delineated in this universalism by the hope of full

integration with the EU, preceded by initial forms of cooperation such as, for example, the Eastern Partnership.[6]

The conservative discourses of the East, especially the Borderlands (*Kresy*) paradigm, have been subject to systematic critique (e.g. Kasperski 2007; Trybuś et al. 2007). Pioneering research in this respect was done by Bogusław Bakuła, who opened up the field in his broadly cited "Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects of Polish Discourse on Eastern 'Borderlands'" (Bakuła 2007). He premised his study on the claim that the Borderlands vision promoted by the conservative paradigm is Polonocentric, Orientalist, assuming the inferiority of eastern nations and their peasant identity likewise conditioning their lesser status. This critique is complemented by Robert Traba's research on other borderland ideologies compared with German ideologies of Eastness (Kleßmann and Traba 2012). The critical approach to the Borderlands (*Kresy*) discourses could also be read alongside, amongst others, Russian ideologies of Siberia and the frontier discourses of the American West. In sum, contemporary Borderlands discourses have a range of social roles, and their historical genesis is often very complex. Besides polemical works it seems, then, it would be valuable to develop an analytical outlook on the Borderlands discourse, tracing its roots and variants in the interwar period and their contemporary reinforcement due to the decades-long censorship ban on these topics, lifted only after 1989. It is important to remember that it resulted in an explosion of Borderlands narratives, leading to the emergence of many Borderlands organisations and an array of writings in many genres and fields of study. All of these, across their ideological spectrum, can be considered as an attempt to fill in the vacuum created by the practical ban on memory about this region in the public discourse (Fuszara 2012).

Polish Discourses of the East and the Belarussian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian Identity Disputes

Polish discourses of the East can be collated with responses to them from the neighbouring countries and their respective identity discourses.

[6] The Eastern Partnership is a European Union initiative governing its relationship with the post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, intended to provide an avenue for discussions on trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours.

It warrants a broader contextualisation, allowing, in turn, an opportunity to observe the dynamics of political alliances built up around identity issues. In the countries in question, the differentiation of identity discourses is determined to a large degree by the logic of dominant political divisions. The political scenes of Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine are divided according to three basic ideological orientations. The first is a national orientation, morphing into a nationalist one. The second is the pro-European liberal option. The third is a pro-Russian orientation directly referring to the Soviet legacy. The first two orientations take Russia as their main negative reference point, seen as the cause of all the evil that befell their countries. For the national/nationalist orientation, the negative Other is also, to a lesser or greater degree, Poland, and specifically its historical embodiments: the First and Second Commonwealths. The negative attitude towards Poland is also shared by the pro-Russian (or neo-Soviet) camp. For both these orientations, the historical visions of Poland produced by the Soviet Union for propaganda purposes still pertain. As researchers of school history course books point out, mainstream school programmes and historiographies, especially in Ukraine and Belarus, are based to a large degree on assumptions developed in the Soviet period (e.g. Gorbaczewa 2007; Jakowenko 2010; Nikžentaitis 2007). Here Poland plays the role of significant Other to its eastern neighbours, as a country that is not only alien but also hostile, persecuting the neighbouring eastern nations, suppressing their liberation struggles and, last but not least, regarding these nations with outright contempt. Even though Lithuania singlehandedly rejected traditional Soviet historiographies, all officially state-supported historical narratives likewise represent Poland as a historical aggressor and oppressor (Safronovas 2009). In all these ideologies, Polishness is defined, both in a cultural sense and as political traditions, as an antithesis of their own national traditions. What follows then is a resolute rejection of the legacy of the First Commonwealth, either as a whole, or as a tradition that Lithuania shared with Poland.[7] As a result, a vision of the Borderlands as a multicultural space of tolerance and liberty is usually rejected as Polish

[7] The First Commonwealth usually refers in the context of history of Poland to the Commonwealth of Both Nations [1569–1795] as defined in footnote 3. The interwar period Republic of Poland (1918–1939) is known as the Second Commonwealth (*Druga Rzeczpospolita*), while contemporary, post-1989 Poland is often called the Third Commonwealth.

post-imperial discourse, or, even, neo-imperial, in cases where Poland is accused of laying claim to territories it lost to its eastern neighbours, as is sometimes represented in the official Belarussian media (Winnicki 2003). It is worth stressing, however, that in the case of Belarus, we are dealing with the dominant role of the pro-Russian and neo-Soviet orientation, espoused in the official state ideology. Consequently, the marginalised liberal and national options, even if maintaining separate programmes, together create a common oppositional camp, which makes it difficult to clearly differentiate between the liberal and national/nationalist orientations. It is, however, possible in Lithuania and Ukraine, where the separate agendas of these orientations are clearly visible. In Lithuania, the pro-Russian and neo-Soviet option is relatively marginalised. The communist party, like in Poland, transformed itself into social democracy and aligned itself with a liberal orientation. In Ukraine, all three orientations are very distinct. What is interesting is that direct references to postcolonial theory in the countries in question relate almost exclusively to visions in which the Soviet Union and Russia appear to be the main colonisers. A range of works resting on this premise have appeared in Lithuania and Ukraine (Kelertas 2006).[8] In Belarus, Ihar Babkau made ample reference to postcolonial theory (Babkov 2010). Interestingly, Poland appears extremely rarely in the history of these countries and their postcolonial interpretations. Most often, its role in these postcolonial approaches is minimised or entirely omitted. It could be linked with a broader strategy of removing Polishness from the historical legacy of these countries and substituting it with often more abstract references to general Western European influences. In the case of western Ukrainian narratives, these often take the form of privileging the Austrian influences and marginalising the Polish ones (Hrycak 2009). The keenest interest in Polishness can be observed in pro-western liberal discourses, but even here, Poland is also often marginalised or omitted. The western liberal identity in countries located between Poland and Russia has developed on the basis of references to the European classics and direct western influences, whether Austrian, German, French, or English. The role of Russian and Soviet influences is likewise often marginalised in most liberal discourses, or represented as an unambiguously negative factor. The Soviet legacy, in turn, is valued in the discourses with a pro-Russian orientation, which is

[8] In Ukraine, Mykola Riabchuk is a leading voice in postcolonial interpretations (Riabchuk 2002, Riabczuk 2015).

especially powerful in Belarus and Ukraine. In these trends, as we can expect, references to postcolonial theory occur only rarely. If they do occur, they do so in line with Russian models, in which Russia is a country colonised by the liberal West.

New Identities in Eastern Poland and Orientalism

In the context of the previously described strong Orientalizing pressure, identity discourses in eastern Poland provide an interesting field for observing the mechanisms of how it functions. The "Eastness" of eastern Poland is of course relative, constructed to a large degree by the border established in 1945. Making it in 2004 the eastern border of the European Union, additionally fortified by the insulating effect of the Schengen Agreement, can be perceived as a strengthening of the "eastern" status of the region in the infrastructural, geopolitical, and symbolic dimensions. eastern Poland has indeed become the borderland of the European Union, facing the challenge of building up a new identity narrative. The coterminous processes of decentralisation and the increasing importance of so-called new regionalism (Scott 2009) place additional pressure on the region and its identity reformulations.

In this context, it is interesting to look at how the regional authorities and the intellectual circles they rely on cope with these pressures. In general, three types of strategies can be discerned here. First, the rejection of Eastness, the stress on belonging to the region of central Poland, underscoring the historically relatively fresh character of "Eastness." This strategy can be observed in Lublin, a city where not all intellectual circles accept adopting the eastern identity, an idea which, by the way, has only recently developed as an official city image project. Another strategy comprises the tactics of ignoring the problem of Eastness. Rzeszów is one of the most pronounced examples here. The city has adopted a self-promotion strategy that does not make any links to its location in south-eastern Poland. Instead, the strategy focuses almost exclusively on issues of development and economy. Proclaiming itself to be the Polish capital of innovation, Rzeszów has focused on the aircraft industry and the research sector. In the officially promoted history of the region, the economic past, especially the history of the Central Industrial District (Centralny Okręg Przemysłowy—COP)—the project of statist industrialisation of the interwar period—is preferred over the cultural and political past, including multicultural matters. The third and the most important

strategy from the vantage point of this chapter's focus is the one that redefines Eastness. It has many forms, but they can be narrowed down to accepting or conditionally adopting a relatively eastern identity or some of its aspects, while simultaneously reworking it through a range of definitions which effectively relativise Eastness and further transfer it onto the eastern partners.

The basic strategies of redefining eastern regional identities in Poland can be connected with the two previously mentioned ideologically marked intellectual orientations: conservative and liberal. Despite frequent critical assessments of the conservative narrations which target the Borderlands discourse, it remains attractive in many of its aspects and uses. Its force seems to lie in the rooting of it in mainstream Polish historical narrations. They translate into the dominant ways of perceiving the East and the ways in which Polish history is represented to western audiences. The traditional Borderlands (*Kresy*) discourse is also attractive because it defines the essence of the region basically as Westness, paid for by the sacrifices it needed to make in order to belong to "the West." In this context, firstly, the war atrocities and sufferings which Poland, and especially its eastern territories, occupied both by the Nazis and Soviets, witnessed are referred to. The Polish past of Vilnius and Lviv still provides a significant symbolic capital that remains socially effective. Wrocław, a city in the south-west of Poland, located in an area termed the "Regained Territories" after the World War II, has quite successfully built its image on the role of the "heir to the traditions of the Polish Lwów [L'viv]" (Makaro 2015). The popularity of Borderland (*Kresy*) discourses in branding and promotional projects in e.g. tourism is evidence for their tangible vitality. In the sphere of identity narratives, the Borderland discourses were most markedly present, amongst cities I have investigated, in Białystok in north-east Poland. The city is host to one of the very active Borderland (*Kresy*) societies—the Society of Friends of Grodno and Wilno. The idea to take on some of the symbolic functions of the formerly Polish Wilno [Vilnius] is also fairly popular there. The cultural and religious diversity of Białystok, whose palpable presence in the public space is barely noticeable, apart from a range of Orthodox churches enriching the cityscape (ca. 1/3 of its inhabitants are Orthodox), is sometimes represented as exactly a substitution for the former, proper Borderlands (*Kresy*). However, the idea of Białystok as the Borderlands (*Kresy*) city is supported by a minority and meets with fervent critique. First, activists from the Belarusian and Orthodox communities protest against it, since

they share a critical stance towards the Borderlands narratives as Polonocentric and, even, neo-colonial in their appropriative attitude towards Eastness. But most of all, it is the liberal camp that stands in opposition to the conservative narratives defining the Eastness of Białystok in terms of the Borderlands (*Kresy*) legacy. In liberal discourses, by contrast, Eastness is redefined from a Eurocentric perspective.

So-called borderlands discourse (note the non-capitalised lettering), and especially the new borderlands discourse, has been the foundation for redefining Eastness within the liberal paradigm. We can mention, after Grzegorz Babiński, ideologies of the borderland (Babiński 1997). Eastern Borderlands discourse, as Babiński pointed out, would here mean their old, classical form, which openly valorised the western side of the borderlands as superior civilisationally and politically, and the eastern side as inferior to the degree it posed a threat to the western essence of Polishness. We can see here that classical Borderlands (*Kresy*) discourse rested significantly on the *antemurale* image of Poland as a bulwark for the whole of Western Europe. As already mentioned, the victimhood threads underlying the suffering inflicted by the Russian and Soviet hands played an important part in this discourse. The new liberal borderlands discourse, whose most renowned theoretician and practitioner is Krzysztof Czyżewski, the president of the Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations Centre and the Borderland Foundation in Sejny (Zaborowska 2009), stands in stark opposition to the former Borderland discourse championed today in the conservative paradigm. Czyżewski rejects Orientalism operating in the conservative Borderlands (*Kresy*) format and proposes various hybrid forms of cultural valorisation of Eastness which can become, in his understanding, a conscious intellectual choice (Czyżewski 2001). This borderland philosophy is premised on an assumption that it is possible, indeed, necessary, to be free to choose one's identity, and that identity play is available to anyone. The models of Eastness as a chosen and playful identity are developed in the writings of renowned liberal writers such as Andrzej Stasiuk, Yurii Andrukhovych, or Ziemowit Szczerek (Kołodziejczyk 2010, 2011). These writers have created a unique, mystical cultural image of the contemporary Eastness of the region as a destroyed, brought back to life eastern space of multicultural coexistence, which has gained recognition in the circles of the liberal intelligentsia. For some of its proponents and enthusiasts, the significance of that model lies in its power to limit the region's dependency thanks to its subversive, ironical force (which includes playful self-Orientalisations,

mocking the western gaze) (Kołodziejczyk 2010) which can at least partly counterbalance the symbolic hegemony of Western Europe.

The new borderland ideology is grounded in a vision of a borderless world as an imaginary ideal, or, at least, the porousness of borders and the free choice in constructing and performing identities by borderland communities. It can also be seen to be inspired by a vision of the world where actual existing borders should accumulate symbolic energies rather than deepen political divisions. What is essential here is the premise of the equivalence of all sides of the borderland regions and all groups making up borderland communities. We can also spot the postulate in this programme that it is necessary to instil an open identity in the borderland inhabitants, allowing them to know the other groups in the region and thus enabling them to make cross-cultural contacts. However, the new Borderlands discourse often demonstrates its normative aspects and thus it can appear to be a ready-made ideology, generating models for quick implementation and internalisation by the borderland inhabitants (Zarycki 2014). In sum, the new borderlands discourses set up a task for the borderland regions, especially for rebuilding their identity, encouraging the locals to adopt an attitude of openness and tolerance and to fully take advantage of the contact zone of cultures in place. In this framework, multiculturalism in these regions remains a hidden potential still to be opened up and mobilised for productive use. An apt reconstruction of borderland awareness will, in this programme, allow the region to use the diversity of cultures and perspectives it is founded on and to mobilise the innovation skills it has developed in its rich history of border crossing.

It is worth noticing that a lot of the new borderlands discourse is strongly normative and idealistic at the same time. This feature is likely to make it difficult to differentiate between attempts to create empirical diagnoses of the existing social relations and visions of their desired forms. Adopting the normative paradigm of the new Borderlands discourse in academic research may also make it difficult to analyse the existing relations of dependence and power in the region and outside. A region treated as a new, open borderland becomes in fact a virtually free subject and its fate depends on its ability to adopt open attitudes and take advantage of its own multiculturalism. It is linked with connections the new borderlands paradigm has with western intellectual trends, of which new regionalism is one of the key projects (Keating 1998). In this way, the new Borderlands discourse seems to be driven by the control mechanism which Michel Foucault named "governmentality" (Foucault 1980),

especially in the way it assigns the region full responsibility for its own fate. This assignment, which can be considered in the framework of self-disciplining discourse, suggests the key role of cultural and psychological factors in the social and economic mobilisation, with the simultaneous minimising of external factors and limitations.

The key limitations often overlooked in the new borderlands discourses are the still existing borders, in particular those which are politically controlled and partly closed, such as the eastern border of Poland, as well as legal and economic borders which grant the regions in Europe access to various forms of public support and capital market resources in a very uneven way. For example, eastern Poland gets considerable support from the EU structural funds, but their scale is much smaller than the support that regions in eastern Germany are getting from public (mainly state) funds. Economic dependence of Poland on the western core, first of all on its capital flows, both in the form of subsidies and direct investment, reproduce basic structural asymmetries between the European core and its eastern peripheries (Drahokoupil 2009). Thus, while Poland has recorded impressive GDP growth rates in the past two decades, its accumulation of capital is very disappointing, which means that in the case of a larger global economic crisis its economy will be in a much more fragile position than the economies of the global core (Podkaminer 2015).[9] Moreover, cheap labour remains Poland's key competitive advantage, which may also explain why the level of convergence between Poland and the western core, as well as between Poland's wealthiest and poorest regions, is low (Gorzelak 2017). We could, therefore, interpret the new borderlands discourse as symbolic compensation, offered usually to peripheral regions by liberal intellectuals inspired by Western intellectual concepts, especially to those to which the status and role of borderlands can be ascribed. Such an interpretation does not assume any intentional plan on the part of the intellectual actors, who, as is usual in the cultural sphere, define their aims mostly in the autonomous realm of an artistic domain. However, even the most disinterested cultural activities may be seen as indirect legitimisations of the wider power relations in which they are embedded. From such a perspective, the interest in the new borderlands discourse

[9] As the Deloitte consulting company has calculated, the average total capital stock per capita of Poles in 2012 was 10 times lower than that of the Greeks and 30 times lower than that of the Germans. These estimates include the value of both financial and material resources, taking into account both private and public foreign debts (Deloitte 2015).

amongst the elites in the centre can be perceived as an indirect offer of cultural compensation from the western core. It can be interpreted as a symbolic recognition of the unique and slightly exotic "modernity" of the peripheral regions of East Central Europe. In exchange, an implicit expectation from peripheries can be seen, especially not to contest the region's dependency on the centre in its economic and cultural dimensions. Simultaneously, as many researchers investigating internal social processes in regions characterised by real cultural, ethnic, or religious diversity, point out adopting some formal politics of multiculturalism most often does not help to any significant degree overcome, or even diagnose, for that matter, the existing tensions, inequalities, and prejudice (Czykwin 2010; Sadowski 2009).

The Cities of Białystok and Lublin and Their "Eastern" Identity

The discourse of new, open borderlands has become part of a common practice of promoting cities and regions within the politics of "place branding." (Kavaratzis 2005). In the case of Białystok, the marketing slogan adopted by the city aptly illustrates the trend: "The Rising Białystok" ("Wschodzący Białystok"), aiming to reverse negative stereotypes of the East and promote the city as a multicultural centre on the rise on the "eastern wall" of the country, as eastern Poland has often been called in the past. The city of Lublin is likewise promoted with a strong reference to its multiculturalism which, however, for historical reasons, can be realised as a project of bringing back the memory of the multicultural past rather than the existing image of social reality. Both Białystok's and Lublin's brand of the new generation border zone is designed to play the role of a mediator in contacting the East. Lublin's marketing slogan is quite literal here: "Lublin – the Gate to the East" or "Lublin – the Gate Between East and West."[10] It is worth noticing that in both these cases we can spot a clear asymmetry. The Polish side of the borderland, at the same time the one creating the borderlands discourse, defines itself as the representative of the West. The role of the West is to provide the East with tangible competences, financial means, and innovative ideas.

[10] https://lublin.eu/en/lublin/news/the-night-of-culture-lublin-gate-of-the-east,147,1261,1.html.

The East, in turn, represented by Ukraine and Belarus, is to a large degree an enchanted land, offering in exchange for the western gifts its spiritual traditions and cultural inspirations. This tendency to reproduce Orientalist stereotypes disguised as promotional slogans communicating progress, modernity, and multiculturalism inscribes itself in a broader tendency to self-Orientalisation in branding discourses observable in other postcommunist countries (Kaneva 2012).

Identity Dilemmas of the Eastern Borderlands

We could, then, pose a thesis that the new discourse of the open borderland is not free from some forms of Orientalisation, even though formally it tried to be just the opposite. However, this discourse preserves the fundamental difference between East and West, despite the declarative recognition of all identities as equal. Also, the new borderlands discourse tends to make an essential, if inadvertent, difference between the inhabitants already oriented towards the "borderlands" and those who still remain trapped in "border" thinking, meaning those who have not yet developed an awareness of the potential of the borderland's multicultural substance, do not have any knowledge of the reality on the other side of the border, and can even be afraid of representatives of other cultures (Kurczewska 2005). Within this framework, adherents of the Eastern Borderlands discourse also represent the "border thinking" model. They all are expected to accomplish the task of mentally opening themselves up to the borderland and multiculturalism, which, in turn, will be automatically identified with the broad current of European diversity, brave and unprejudiced crossing of physical and symbolic borders and the taking on of "innovative" attitudes. The differentiation between "border-oriented" and "borderland-oriented" local inhabitants also has a temporal aspect. The former are oriented towards the past and present, or, in fact, dwell in those permanently; the latter are already in the future, they are transgressing the limiting frames of the old space divided by borders and becoming true Europeans. The division into East and West is, as we can expect, likewise based on the analogical temporal difference. Theoretically they are equal, but the West is implied to have moved on to the future, while the East remains locked in the past, whose sense is duly bipolar: the negative past is that with which the East still has to grapple, like the legacy of communism, and the positive one, like the eastern Orthodox spirituality which it can share with the West.

We can, therefore, observe that two dimensions of soft Orientalism are hidden in the new borderlands discourse. The first can be categorised as internal—it divides the borderland inhabitants into those who are still oriented towards the border and, thus, living in the past and those who are oriented towards the borderland and thus looking towards the future. The second, external dimension defines the cooperation between the West and East as an exchange of knowledge and financial capital resources from the former for cultural resources from the latter. As we can expect, this unidirectional trend provokes a range of comments and interpretations inspired by postcolonial studies.

The conclusion we can draw from these observations is that it is not possible to entirely avoid Orientalist valorisations in the description of central and eastern parts of Europe. Hierarchisation, establishing the West as superior over the East, is so strong and so pervasively saturates all public and academic discourses that it is not possible to circumvent it. Formal declarations about the equal status and treatment of all parts of the continent cannot change the fact that it is the states defined as western which have the power to generate discourses, effectively assuming the position of universality and being commonly perceived as the desired framework for the emancipation from national, cultural, or economic domination. In other words, we can surmise that in East Central and Eastern Europe, a full escape from Orientalisation and creating a language entirely free from it is not possible today. What is, instead, possible is making attempts to fathom structures of social fields which create this Orientalist mindset to a lesser or greater degree. The research outlined in this chapter is one of the possible examples of this effort.

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