

Anastasiia Bakanova

Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, Ukraine

DEFINITION OF “THE NEW EASTERN EUROPE”: THE LANDS IN-BETWEEN

This article focuses on the study of the definition of “The New Eastern Europe”. Political scientists and specialists in security studies and international relations are trying hard to come up with new definitions of the area. Their solution is to fragment the region, dividing it into ever-smaller entities. Author divides scientists on three main groups due to their attitude to existence/non-existence of NEE as the “region”. The author describes the main outcomes of scientists like Gerhard Mangott, whose main idea is that the New Eastern Europe is determined only by what outside players developed in pursuing strategic and geopolitical interests. Angela E. Stent wrote about really existing region of “lands in-between”. Serhii Plokyh wrote about growing tendency to treat Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as the core of “The New Eastern Europe.” There are geographic, cultural, ethnic, and historical factors that set it apart from its neighbours. If the Baltic countries have been oriented for centuries toward the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe, the NEE countries have been oriented toward the Black Sea. The NEE emerges as the only term capable of linking Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova together.

Key words: The New Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, political scientists.

The world at large is understandably confused about the meaning of the term “Eastern Europe”. So is the community of experts, whom the general public holds mainly responsible for the persistent confusion. Political scientists and specialists in security studies and international relations are trying hard to come up with new definitions of the area. Their solution is to fragment the region, dividing it into ever-smaller entities. One result of this development is the eastward extension of Central Europe, which now includes a number of former East European countries whose historians insisted for decades on their East-Central European status. Another outcome is the reinvention of the term “Eastern Europe”. As it went out of fashion among former East Europeans, they passed it on as a kind of intellectual hand-me-down to the East, which has now been reinvented by specialists in international studies as “The New Eastern Europe” (NEE).

For analyzing the definition of “The New Eastern Europe” in this article we divided on scientists to three main groups due to their attitude to existence/non-existence of NEE as the “region”.

First group is represented by Gerhard Mangott, Professor of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck and Senior Research Fellow on Eastern Europe and the former USSR at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs in Vienna. He believes that when we treat these countries as a different and distinct region – we do mistake.

The main argument is that the NEE countries are distinct from central Europe but very similar to Russia. In his work Mangott seeks to deconstruct the concept of “The New Eastern Europe”. His scientific tools were social indicators and indices of human development throughout Central and Eastern Europe as well as Russia.

For Mangott many of these indicators demonstrate that the NEE countries have much more in common with Russia than with the central European countries. Really, it is not surprising that the NEE human development indices are to a very large extent similar to those of Russia, since all of them were part of the Soviet Union for many decades. As Belarus and Ukraine had been part of the Czarist Russian Empire as well, Mangott assumed long-lasting historical impacts on the social structures, value and belief systems as well as cultural features in the NEE, all of which tie them together with Russia. At the same time, he stated that the NEE countries are significantly different from human development levels prevalent in central Europe, albeit less so when compared to Romania and Bulgaria; many indicators draw a divide between central Europe and the post-Soviet space, whereas almost none indicate any separation between the NEE and Russia¹.

Therefore Mangott argued that the new Eastern Europe can neither be construed on the basis of

¹ Mangott, G. (2007). Deconstructing a Region. Hamilton, D. Mangott, G. (ed.). *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*. Washington, DC., 265.

social and economic indicators nor on the basis of political or socio-cultural variables. As there are no significant objective reasons for defining Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova as a distinct region - different both from central Europe and Russia - the whole concept of the NEE is based due to Mangott on subjective interpretations or constructed reality¹.

Mangott asked what then makes the NEE a region? If we were to delve into history, language, and cultural heritage, we'd find many arguments for and against a regional identity. Politically, socially and economically, however, these countries share few common features. These countries comprise a region not in and of themselves, but as a function of the geopolitical engagement of other nations in their far and near abroad: Russia, the U.S. and the EU. The new Eastern Europe has no distinct structures; it does not exist per se. So, main idea of Mangott is that the new Eastern Europe is what outside players make of it in pursuing strategic and geopolitical interests.

In this context the basic question is whether outside players will develop a cooperative and inclusive approach or a competitive geopolitical struggle for influence in the NEE countries. Will we see a zero-sum approach unfold, with the EU and the U.S. pitted against Russia as each side seeks to stake its claim in this in-between-region?

Mangott seems to believe so. And he cited Bruce Jackson, who argues that "What is underway in and around the former Soviet Union is a struggle between the soft power of Russia and the soft power of the Western democracies... for the political orientation of the countries in Europe's East, for economic influence in these regions and for the extension of their respective alliance systems and multilateral institutions." Russophobes tend to see this as an epic struggle between the forces of democratic good and Russian autocratic evil. Jackson goes as far as to demand a program of "geopolitical revisionism"².

It would be detrimental to continental security, however, if the NEE countries were either to become the new eastern frontiers of Euro-Atlantic institutions or the western border of a renewed Russian hegemonic area. According to Mangott the NEE countries should seek neither of these options, as they would either develop artificial western identities or marginalize their post-Soviet identity. Multiple identities, endorsed by broad majorities of these societies, are more the norm in this region than an exclusive eastern or western orientation. This mix of identity can be an opportunity for building bridges rather than barriers³.

But reality rather demonstrates competitive integration efforts in this region by Russia and the EU. Russia views the EU's initiatives within the European neighborhood policy as undermining Russian efforts to build an economic integration scheme, starting with a Customs Union. The EU as a whole does not pursue an agenda designed to hurt Russian interests at its core, but aims to include Russia in its effort to build a ring of 'friends' along its eastern borders.

In conclusions Mangott insisted that these societies need to deliberate the nature of "European" values. But they also need a societal discourse about their own identities, one that takes into account national traditions and core values as well as basic principles they (aim to) share with western European societies. It is first and foremost – underlined Mangott – the people of the NEE themselves who ought to contemplate the rationale of their societies; external actors such as the EU or the U.S. should not be seen – and should not perceive themselves - as the primary sources or references for the identity of the new Eastern European nations. Such a 'native discourse' on societal and cultural identities may very well serve to promote the cohesiveness of these societies - an essential precondition for state-building and "stateness"⁴. So, Mangott don't believe in "return of the NEE to Europe" and concluded that the EU bears great responsibility not to send "confusing signals" to the NEE⁵.

Second group have represented by Angela E. Stent, Professor of Government and Foreign Service and Director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University.

She believes that historical essence of the region NEE tied with their geopolitical role as an object of fluid, lying in an area contested by Russia and Germany. None of them had ever existed as states with these borders, nor did they have a tradition of consensus on what constituted their respective national identities. But now they have emerged and survived, and are slowly developing a more viable consensus on

¹ Mangott, G. (2007). Deconstructing a Region. Hamilton, D. Mangott, G. (ed.). *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*. Washington, DC., 274.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 275.

⁴ Ibid., 262.

⁵ Ibid., 286.

nationhood and statehood, despite the enormous problems they face. Their future development and ability to find a viable *modus vivendi* with their two powerful neighbors - Russia and the European Union - will determine whether indeed post cold war Europe will be “whole and free”¹. So, Stent wrote about really existing region of “lands in-between”.

Second important question is what countries belong to NEE. Therefore Stent discussed the impact of their current situation on their future relations with their immediate neighbors - Russia and the EU. Lying between an expanding but closed EU and a resurgent Russia, these “lands in-between” remain in a grey zone. But she insisted that if Europe indeed wants to be “whole and free”, the EU needs to include them, “Europe doesn’t end at the Polish-Ukrainian border”. For Stent NEE includes countries who after the fall of communism have only been two clubs that aspiring these countries sought to join - the European Union and NATO². But Stent’s definition still not understandable: what about Belarus? Should we exclude this country from the region NEE because Belarus never tends to join NATO and the EU?

So, Stent’s point of view - comparing to Mangott - looks more fruitful for analyzing the definition NEE, but we need more arguments to understand what countries should be included in the frames of this region.

Third group have represented by Serhii Plokyh (Plokhii), the Mykhailo S. Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University. As a historian he wrote first of all about special features of the history these “lands in-between”, countries in a unique geopolitical position, sandwiched between the extended European Union in the west and Russia in the east. For him Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are viewed as the core of the “New Eastern Europe”³.

Where is Eastern Europe today? And if it is not where it used to be, where did it go? Plokyh answered that “if you Google “Eastern Europe+Map,” you will get about 11,600,000 results, a reassuring sign that the region is alive and well. But do not expect an easy answer to the question of where it is actually located. The web will provide you with endless variants, starting with those that treat the region as everything between Prague in the west and the Ural Mountains in the east, and ending with more “modest” proposals, like that of the CIA World Factbook, which would limit the region to the former western borderlands of the Soviet Union, from Estonia in the north to Moldova in the south”. The confusion is understandable on more than one level. After all, it is no easy matter to determine where Eastern Europe ends if you do not know where Europe per se ends. Europe is not a continent in its own right, and its imagined eastern frontier is constantly on the move⁴.

The geographic scope of the term depends on the author and his or her location. For example, the publishers of the journal “Nowa Europa Wschodnia” in Wrocław believe that the NEE includes almost everything east of Poland. The authors of a position paper on the European Union’s Eastern Partnership (produced in Stockholm) include Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the three Trans-Caucasian states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in the NEE. A study produced in Austria limits the term to the first three countries, excluding the Trans-Caucasus.

There is a clearly growing tendency to treat Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as the core of the “New Eastern Europe.”

The concept of East-Central Europe, so popular in Poland since the 1950s, failed to fire the imagination of local elites in the NEE. But even outside the region, there is no consensus on whether the countries of the NEE belong to East-Central Europe. If Jerzy Kłoczowski, the most loyal supporter of the East-Central European idea, insists on Ukraine’s belonging to the region, Paul Robert Magocsi includes only west and central Ukraine in his “Atlas of East-Central Europe”⁵.

For better or for worse, “New Eastern Europe” emerges as the only term capable of linking Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova together in their geopolitical no-man’s land. The Baltic states which are included in the “Eastern Europe” of the CIA “World Factbook”, and the Trans-Caucasian states which are included in the “New Eastern Europe” of the EU Eastern Partnership Program, have regional identities of their own. Not so Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. If you partition the old Eastern Europe between the new

¹ Stent, A. (2007). *The Lands In Between: The New Eastern Europe in the Twenty-First Century*. Hamilton, D. Mangott, G. (ed.). *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*. Washington, DC., 1.

² Ibid., 4.

³ Plokyh, S. (2011). The “New Eastern Europe”: What to Do with the Histories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova? *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, 4, 762.

⁴ Ibid., 763.

⁵ Ibid., 764.

Central Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, the Trans-Caucasus, and, finally, Russia and Central Asia, the residue turns out to be the three countries stuck in between: Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova – the quintessential “New Eastern Europe”¹.

Looking at the new political map of Eastern Europe, the question one wants to ask is whether there is anything more to this otherwise nameless region than pure geopolitical accident. Some scholars justifiably argue that the NEE identity has been invented outside the region and imposed on it by political developments beyond its control. Others say that talking about these countries as a separate region in historical terms means justifying the current division of Europe and making it all but permanent.

There are also voices claiming that a definition of this region as a European rather than a Russian borderland is bound to encourage unwanted bids for EU membership on the part of local elites.

For Plokhy turning point is that the history of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as one region can help us better understand its past and explain its current situation.

The immediate past of these three countries contains some common element that differentiates them from their neighbours on the other side of the EU’s eastern border. Indeed it does: a mere twenty years ago they were western borderlands of the USSR. Countries that were not part of the Soviet Union, like Bulgaria and Romania, whose political and economic situation was little better than that of Ukraine or Moldova through most of the 1990s, made it into the European Union, but those of the NEE did not. Plokhy wrote: “It appears that the internal “iron curtain” between the USSR and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe was more formidable than the outer one that divided the capitalist West from the socialist East”².

This explanation would probably suffice were it not for the Baltic states – former Soviet republics that managed to join the European Union. Because the Baltic states are former Soviet republics, the CIA “World Factbook” groups them together with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as constituents of “Eastern Europe.” There are, however, major geographic, cultural, and historical factors that link the NEE countries together while distinguishing them from the Baltic states. The northern border of the NEE more or less coincides with the watershed between the Baltic and Black Sea basins. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania belong to the Baltic basin; while most of Belarus and all of Ukraine and Moldova belong to the Black Sea basin, with the Dnieper, Dniester, and Prut as their largest rivers. If the Baltic countries have been oriented for centuries toward the Baltic Sea and Northern Europe, the NEE countries have been oriented toward the Black Sea³.

Culture and ethnicity are other important factors that set the countries of the NEE apart from their Baltic neighbours. It suffices to mention religion. If in the case of the Baltics, we are dealing with Catholic and Protestant traditions, which set the region apart from Russia; the dominant religious tradition in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova is Orthodoxy, which links them intimately with Russia’s old and new imperial ideology. In the cases of Ukraine and Belarus, there is also the phenomenon of East Slavic proximity, which allows Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to speak of Holy Rus’- an ethno-religious entity that includes Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Where religion and East Slavic identity work together, as in Belarus and eastern Ukraine, the spell of the former imperial centre is strongest. Where they do not reinforce each other, as in Moldova and the former Habsburg lands of Ukraine, attachment to Moscow is less prominent or completely nonexistent.

Thus, for Plokhy the NEE is not just a figment of current geopolitical imagination. There are geographic, cultural, ethnic, and historical factors that set it apart from its neighbours.

Now historians of the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are undergoing confusion and uncertainty. Imagining the history of these three countries as a unit will help liberate their history from the isolation and contribute to a better understanding of the histories of each individual country and the region as a whole. A new framework for historical analysis – Plokhy insisted – can break the existing intellectual deadlock and lead historians and society at large to think about their history in broader and more inclusive terms⁴.

Tony Judt wrote in this regard that “Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians have all represented themselves in their literature and political myths as guarding the edges of “Europe” (or Christianity). But as

¹ Plokhy, S. (2011). The “New Eastern Europe”: What to Do with the Histories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova? *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, 4, 764.

² Ibid., 765.

³ Ibid., 766.

⁴ Ibid., 766.

a brief glance at map suggests, their claims are mutually exclusive: they can't all be right"¹.

It is much more productive to think of the NEE frontier as a meeting place of various states, cultures, and nationalities.

Historically, there were at least three types of borders that came together in the NEE region: imperial (Russian, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Commonwealth); cultural/religious, which divided Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism; and ethnic/national. The list of the largest ethnic groups in the region would include, apart from Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Moldovans/Romanians, also Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Crimean Tatars and Russians.

Administered at various times by states dominated by Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, Austrians, Romanians, Germans, and Russians, the NEE also became a meeting point for a variety of administrative systems and political cultures².

A new analytical framework makes possible to see things not seen or neglected previously. A focus on national history prevents one from understanding what eventually caused the most profound change in the region, namely, the "closing" of its cultural frontier - in other words, the elimination of its traditional ethnic and cultural diversity. Blaming nationalism alone for this development will not do, given the profound differences in the maturation and aggressiveness of ethnic nationalism in that part of the world.

The disappearance of many ethnic and religious minorities from the territory of Belarus can hardly be attributed to the strength of Belarusian nationalism. When we look at the region as a whole, it becomes more apparent that the transformation of the borderland from a multiethnic and multicultural space into an ethnic and cultural monolith was accomplished largely by "outside" powers with strong imperial ambitions. They managed to marshal resources and mobilize the population on a scale unthinkable for the weak national movements of the region, which generally served as junior partners in the cleansing of the borderlands, occasionally undertaken with the tacit or even explicit approval of democratic world leaders³.

Finally, Plokhy addressed the question of the place of outside influence on the existing borders of the NEE countries. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Holocaust, and the Yalta agreements shaped the new ethno-cultural landscape of the region, and we have a better chance of understanding such changes if we think about the region as a unit⁴.

Our studies of the definition of "The New Eastern Europe" demonstrate absence of unanimity among political scientists. There are three main groups due to their attitude to existence/non-existence of the NEE as the "region". The main outcomes of Gerhard Mangott is that the New Eastern Europe is first of all what outside players make of it in pursuing strategic and geopolitical interests. Angela E. Stent proves that now the region of NEE is really exists and its main attribute is that it unites "lands in-between". Sergii Plokhy demonstrates that the core of "The New Eastern Europe" is formed by Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. There are many undecided questions for further studies, for ex., how will be the region's long-term identity shaped by clash of the West and Russia? Because all scientists in their works wrote that the region had seen no major upheaval since 1992 (the military conflict in the Trasnistria), and that Ukraine and Belarus had so far avoided big social turmoil and violent conflicts. But current war between Russia and Ukraine dramatically changed all previous conclusions.

References

1. Mangott, G. (2007). Deconstructing a Region. Hamilton, D., Mangott, G. (ed.). *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*. Washington, DC.
2. Plokhy, S. (2011). The "New Eastern Europe": What to Do with the Histories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova? *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, 4, 763-769.
3. Stent, A. (2007). The Lands In Between: The New Eastern Europe in the Twenty-First Century. Hamilton, D., Mangott, G. (ed.). *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*. Washington, DC.

¹ Plokhy, S. (2011). The "New Eastern Europe": What to Do with the Histories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova? *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, 4, 767.

² Ibid., 768.

³ Ibid., 768.

⁴ Ibid., 769.