Core and Periphery: Who belongs to Europe? – Part 1

An essay in two parts by N.D.K Bernd.

What is Europe? Which countries are considered European? Is Poland really European? What about Russia and Great Britain? These are questions that every Bernd has asked himself and perhaps even spent hours arguing with strangers on the internet about. In this article we will put memes aside and look at what others have written. According to Hugh Seton-Watson, it is not possible to talk of a single Europe. Europe has been defined by such different things as geography, institutions, religion, race, culture and historical trajectory.[1] This article is too short to treat each of these definitions, but suffice it to say they are all inadequate.

These definitions all fall short because there are several different ideas of Europe. Ideas are the normative concepts used to describe the essence of something. The idea of Europe is not arbitrary; it is formed by the perceived reality of people. In relation to the topic of this article, this means that whether or not a country is considered to be European depends on the platform of the speaker. The idea of Europe is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. This also means that Europe can be seen from both inside and outside. Europe can be a subject, but it can also be an object. According to Pim den Boer there was no idea of Europe before the French revolution. He argues that in the early 19th century certain historical identifications with Europe were rediscovered, and became central. These were the identification of Europe with Christendom, liberty and civilization. This is where the history of the idea of Europe originates.[2] This is not to say that there was no notion of Europe before the French revolution, but Europe was seen as being special because of the enlightenment, not because of its past, which was considered to be dark and primitive. It was in the 19th century that the idea of Europe became a subject of political debates and an ideological instrument, especially in the context of different nationalisms.[3]

In order to facilitate a discussion on what Europe is, part one of this article will take a point of departure in Russia. Part two will deal with Great Britain and also contain a chapter concluding both parts. These two countries have been chosen because they are often seen as periphery, not only by what is traditionally considered to be "core" Europe, but also in many cases by themselves. The discussion will take this periphery position as a point of departure.

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[1] Seton-Watson, 1989, p. 31
[2] Boer, 1995, p. 13
[3] Boer, 1995, p. 14

The case of Russia

Throughout history, Russia's relationship with the rest of Europe has always been special and it still is today. There have been numerous debates about whether Russia should be considered a European power, and Russia has at certain times been identified with the Asiatic or Barbarian. There are a number of different reasons for this. Russia has developed independently from Western Europe. In 1054, Russia went its own way when it adopted Orthodox Christianity after the East-West Schism between the Byzantine and Roman churches. In the 13th century, the Mongol invasion and later military pressure from the west kept Russia isolated.[4]

Starting with Peter the Great this all changed. Peter the Great was determined to make Russia a part of Europe. The designation of the Ural Mountains as the boundary between the Asian and the European continent was established in Russia during the time of Peter the Great. According to Stuart Woolf it served the purpose of identifying the Russian empire as a western power, with an Asiatic colonial periphery.[5]

"How European are we?" This is a question that has pervaded Russian identity debate since Peter the Great. The answer to that question again depends on who is asking it. There are two major constituents in the debate about Russian national identity, these are Nationalists (Slavophiles) and Westernizers. Historically, Westernizers saw Russia as backwards compared to Europe, they looked at European countries for ideas on how to change this. They wanted to adopt European culture and ideas; for them Europe was an ideal to be imitated. They tried to reshape Russia as a European country. Liberal Westernizers wanted the political freedom of countries like England and France, and Radicals were inspired by Marxist ideas. The conservative government was mainly interested in the efficiency of Prussia. Nevertheless, they all favored importing European ideas and wanted to see Russia as a part of Europe. Increasing interest in reshaping Russia as a European power sparked a nationalist reaction. Nationalists, as opposed to Westernizers, considered Russia to be a world of its own, culturally and historically distinct from Europe. They rejected any notion that Russia should imitate the West. In spite of this, Nationalists still believed they had something in common with the countries to the west. They were often supporters of pan-Slavism (under Russian supremacy). They stressed the common foundation of Russia and Europe in the Christian and Greek culture.

[4] Bugge, 1995, p. 137
[5] Woolf, 1992, p. 91

Furthermore, they believed Russia could be a "savior" of a Europe, they considered to be materialistic and degenerate.[6]

From the time of Peter the Great until the Russian revolution in 1917, the Tsars of Russia were successful in positioning Russia in Europe. In 1815 Russia became part of the Holy Alliance with Austria and Prussia, and through this managed to play an important part in the affairs of Europe several times in the 19th century. Within this old order of Europe, Russia became an equal to Prussia and Austria.[7]

Westernizers were, however, not a uniform group, as mentioned previously; it was not only the reactionary Russian government that was inspired by the West. Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik leader of the 1917 revolution was himself a Westernizer. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks coming to power after the revolution in 1917 meant that Russia was again excluded from being a part of Europe. The Capital of Russia, which had been St. Petersburg since Peter the Great, was moved back to Moscow, an act with great symbolism. Many Europeans believed that Russia had turned its back on Europe, despite the fact that the revolution was made in the name of what was thought to be the most progressive body of thought in modern Europe.[8]

The Bolshevik takeover meant that most of the Europeanized section of Russian society fled to Europe. The Russian immigrants, and the stories they told, sparked European interest in Russia. Some of these emigrants presented Russia as being completely separate from the European cultural world, and held that Russia was located in a geographical area, that was neither European nor Asian. This area was called Eurasia and the proponents of this idea were called Eurasianists. For the first time, Russia was presented, by Russians themselves, as being completely outside the Europe. A key leader of the Eurasian movement was Nikolai S. Trubeckoj. He meant, like many people in the west, that the Russian revolution had revealed the true, Asiatic nature of Russia. Trubeckoj considered the boundary between East and West to be located between the Slavs and the Russians, because unlike nationalists, he considered Russians to be different from Slavs.[9]

Even though the rest of Europe and some Russians stopped looking at Russia as a European power after the revolution, Seton-Watson argues that Russian communists continued to see Russia as

[6] Bugge, 1995, p. 137
[7] Boer, 1995, p. 70
[8] Seton-Watson, 1989, p. 35
[9] Bugge, 1995, p. 138

belonging to Europe. However, for them it was not a matter of Russia being a part of Europe or not; they saw the world as separated into a capitalist and socialist part. This did not change after World War 2, and for most of the post-war period the capitalist/socialist dichotomy remained.[10]

After the World War 2, the romantic notion of the idea of Europe took a backseat. The atrocities of two world wars, colonialism, and Holocaust had discredited Europe, which had been utterly destroyed and was now wedged between two superpowers. However, towards the end of the Cold War in the 1980's, the concept of Europe gained a new dynamism, and was once again discussed as a positive idea.[11] Perhaps this is why the issue of Russian national identity in relation to Europe in the late 1980's again became an important issue. With the general decline of the Soviet Union, and the weakening of its grasp on Eastern Europe, the old debate about whether Russia should westernize and emulate the western European nations was revived.[12]

One of the key proponents of the idea, that Russia/the Soviet Union should be a European country, was found in Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev introduced the concept of a 'Common European House.' This was an attempt to anchor Russia/the Soviet Union in Europe.[13] Gorbachev stressed the common culture, religion, and history of Europe and Russia and in 1988 he wrote in a text on perestroika:

> "*We are Europeans. Old Russia was united with Europe by Christianity […]*
> *The history of Russia is an organic part of the great European history"*[14]

With the increasing loss of control in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev's 'Common European House' was, according to Ole Wæver, an initial attempt at gaining influence in Western Europe. However, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, it became part of a strategy to prevent Russia from being excluded from Europe.[15]

A new movement of liberal Westernizers was also born out of the revived national debate and they came to dominate it in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Some of them saw the relationship between Europe and Russia as that of a teacher and a student. They tended to see themselves as an endangered species of European Russians, one step above the uncivilized, barbarian and Asiatic

[10] Seton-Watson, 1989, p. 36
[11] Wæver, 1995, p. 176
[12] Ibid., p. 186
[13] Ibid., p. 186
[14] Neumann, 1998, p. 19
[15] Wæver, 1995, p. 186

masses. In this respect, they had a lot in common with the pre-revolutionary liberal Westernizers, and just like them, these new liberals also wanted Russia to be a European nation with a European identity, and discarded any Russian identity separated from Europe.

However, not all liberal Westernizers wanted to replace Russian identity with a European one. In their attempt to shape a new Russian identity separate from the old Soviet one, another pre-revolutionary concept was revived, although this time with different meaning: That of Eurasia. The new Eurasianists did not believe that Russia could become a European nation; furthermore, they considered it a bad political strategy to completely abandon Russian identity. They advocated a Russia that was connected to Europe, but separate.[16]

Like before the 1917 revolution, the attempt to reposition Russian national identity in a European cultural framework sparked a nationalist reaction. These Nationalists tended to see Russia and Europe as fundamentally different entities. Russia was a different civilization, religiously and culturally different, and incompatible with Europe. They denied any notion that Russia should attempt to reform itself as a European nation. They saw the import of European ideas as something which is was detrimental to Russia. The Nationalists can be split up into two camps. the Statists wanted a strong Russian state to hold Europe at bay and act as a balancing force between East and West, while the Organic were more interested in the revival of the Russian national spirit. Obviously, these overlap and both camps sought to keep Russia free from European interference, by walling it off culturally and economically.[17]

According to Fyodor Lukyanov, it is important to remember that the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an independent Russia happened almost at the same time as the formation of the European Union, which has served as a mirror for Russia's self identification. Furthermore, since the establishment of the European Union, there has been a change in Russian discourse, where Europe increasingly is seen as being equal to the European Union.[18]

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union came a period where Russian policy aimed at integrating Russia with Europe. Russia was to gradually approach Europe by adopting the norms and rules of EU legislation, which was considered to be better, and more progressive than Russia's.

[16] Neumann, 1998, p. 21
[17] Ibid., p. 23
[18] Lukyanov, 2008, p. 1107

This was a period of westernization, Russia was back in the role of the student, and it looked as though Russia was on a path of becoming a European nation.[19]

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he initially followed the same path Russia had been on since the breakup of the Soviet Union. With the oil crisis of 2003 came a shift in Russia's relationship with Europe. Russia now had a new instrument to demonstrate its power in the form of its energy branch. This was also reflected in Russia's relationship with the European Union. According to Lukyanov Russia used this opportunity to demand a more equal relationship with the European Union, and Putin has on several occasions stressed the need for reciprocity in the EU/Russian relationship. [20]

While economic cooperation has increased during the rule of Putin, Russia has also ceased integrating further into Europe. Russian policy, then, is shaped by a combination of Statist Nationalism and Eurasianism. Statist Nationalism because there is a focus on maintaining a strong and independent Russian state, with the ability to take action without influence of the EU, and Eurasian because Russia does not completely deny the merits of being connected to Europe. The dominant political discourse in Russia does not consider Europe and Russia to be opposed and fundamentally different. There have been some who see the European Union as an empire encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence, and especially in conservative circles there are people who remain skeptic of Russia's involvement in a Europe they consider to be degenerate.[21] The current discourse in the Russian debate about national identity and self-positioning has a lot of parallels to the debate before the Russian revolution. Iver B. Neumann points out that there exists a deep ambivalence in Russia when it comes to its European identity. This can be traced back to the question about whether or not Russian and European identities are compatible.[22] This is not an unknown concept, in Britain the same question remains, but Russia is part of the stigmatized periphery defined by core Europe, and thus Russia struggles to be recognized as being truly European. In that respect Russia is unique because it is strong enough to exist on its own, as something separate from Europe.

[19] Ibid., p. 1109
[20] Ibid., p. 1110
[21] Ibid., p. 1112
[22] Neumann, 1998, p. 41

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