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Central and Eastern Europe. An Opportunity or a Threat to European Integration?**

The last two issues of Eastern European Countryside (2017/23 and 2018/24) present an interesting critical discussion of two articles about Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), a region that is increasingly perceived as a problem area, particularly in Western Europe.[1] The first text, written by Beata Bielska

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** This article is a result of discussions that took place at Prof. Andrzej Kaleta's classes 'European Integration' in the academic year 2017/2018, held as part of doctoral studies at the Institute of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The classes were among others attended by Joanna Lajstet, Katarzyna Tamborska, Katarzyna Kuczkowska-Golińska and Emilia Zielińska. The author would like to thank the latter two for their consent to have their material used for the purposes of the seminar meetings. In the text below the notion 'European integration' denotes primarily cultural integration the aim of which is to build a 'native (common) Europe' (a phrase as used by Prof. Andrzej Kaleta).

[1] Many authors point to growing nationalist and xenophobic attitudes in the Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary) in response to the so-called refugee crisis which in some countries has led to groups (more or less) sceptical about further European integration rising to the position of power. For example, according to Luigi Geinanzzi, a publicist and specialist on Eastern European politics, the Visegrád Group 'has become the front of rejection and closure in order to maintain the process of European integration. The successors of Solidarity, sons of the Velvet Revolution, the generation that grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, refuses to accept refugees, resorts to strict rules and methods to reject them, sealing their borders and raising new walls' (Tornielli 2016). Journalists from Newsweek Europe use the same tone to point out that the CEE

and Michał Wróblewski (2017: 209–220), refers to excerpts from a book by Christian Giordano (2015), who – based on various post-colonial and peripheral theories and concepts – ascribes the properties of anti-Europe to CEE, thus giving it the status of peripheries or semi-peripheries. While Bielska and Wróblewski agree that adopting Giordano's perspective in research on CEE's complexity may bring certain discoveries and that his intuitive approach to imitative modernisation of Poland is both accurate and justified, they stress the need for the proper measuring of observed phenomena and their correlations. They believe that it is necessary if we are to eliminate unclear concepts and overt generalisations of which, as the authors say, there are too many in Giordano's work.[2]

In the second article, Sylwia Michalska and Dominika Zwęglińska (2018: 245–254) discuss the ideas that were raised in the Special Issue (4/2016) of RECEO[3], a journal dealing with rural populations and the neo-conservative revolution in the CEE countries. The authors of the article focus on the issue's editorial and four texts[4] about Poland and Hungary, i.e.

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states 'loudly oppose the accepting of refugees in their countries', in which they contradict the states of the 'old' EU-15. The authors stress that politicians from the CEE countries (Victor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Robert Fico and Miloš Zelman) take advantage of their citizens' disappointment with the EU, turning to national values (Newsweek Poland 2016, *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia. Raj dla narodowych radykałów* [Central and Eastern Europe. Paradise for national radicals], 2016, http://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/zachodnia-prasa-o-rzadzie-pis-nacjonalizm-prawica-europa-,artykuly,382837,1.html (01.01.2019).

[2] To this end, the authors suggest studying migration flows, particularly from the former Eastern Bloc countries which are not EU members to those that joined the EU after 2004 (Bielska and Wróblewski 2017).

[3] Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest (RECEO) (RECEO) is a quarterly established in 1970 by CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique). It publishes original scientific articles in the field of broadly understood social sciences (economics, sociology, law, political sciences, geography, etc.), which deal with the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Next to Issue No. 47/4/2016, referred to by Sylwia Michalska and Dominika Zwęglińska, rural issues are for example also discussed in Issue No. 38/2/2007 – development of rural areas in East Germany; No. 39/4/2008 – decolectivisation and local development; No. 43/2/2012 – implementation of the LEADER programme; No. 48/1––2/2017 – connections between rural areas and the market.

[4] The following studies are analysed: Andrzej Leder, Sleepwalking through a Revolution (pp. 29–55); Frederic Zalewski, The Emergence of an Anti-Liberal Democracy in Poland (pp. 57–86); András Bozóki, Mainstreaming the Far Right: Cultural Politics

countries in which – according to the writers – right-wing populism is on the rise. They link this phenomenon to a still largely rustic nature of the CEE societies, their archaic agrarian structure, low level of education among residents of rural areas as well as peasant movements and rural traditions which are here stronger than in more modernised regions of Europe.

While I agree with many theses formulated by the authors of both articles, I would like to prove that not all differences of our region – typically presented as its weaknesses – should be interpreted as destructive to the process of European integration. Many of them may also be reasonably analysed as beneficial for the strengthening of the European project and treated as a reservoir of new impulses and integration paths.

A few comments on geographical borders of CEE and the historical, cultural and social specificity of the region

The problem of CEE's geographical borders certainly does not make this task any easier, as [...] *in American, British and Polish* [as well as many other – AD] *geography textbooks, the issue of the borders is each time dealt with differently* (Bański 2008: 9). Therefore, one can hardly criticise fairly wide circles of social science researchers who tend to treat this problem even more freely (Bielska and Wróblewski 2017). After all, to them physical geography tends to be shrouded by more significant factors of political, historical, socio-cultural and historical-cultural nature (see Tokarska 2013: 18). For example, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) is an OECD term for the group of countries comprising Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.[5] In numerous scientific studies (Bański 2008; Bartoszewska 2007; Buchowski and Kołbon 2001; Cobel-Tokarska 2013; Kłoczkowski 2004; Mucha 2009; Sowa 2011; Zenderowski 2003),

in Hungary (pp. 87–116); Daniel Płatek and Piotr Płucienniczak, Civil Society and Extreme-Right Collective Action in Poland 1990–2013 (pp. 117–146).

[5] https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=303 (01.01.2019).

there seems to be no consensus, even on the fundamental level, regarding which countries this concept applies to, forcing authors to adopt more or less arbitrary solutions. After all, it would be difficult to imagine a debate about certain properties of societies, nations and states without their concretisation in geographical terms.[6]

Nevertheless, there are many arguments, the justification of which requires no further discussion here, for recognising ECC as a region that encompasses socially and culturally diversified countries which have one thing in common: *a syndrome of underdevelopment, incompleteness, lacking self-containment and well-established form, of subordination and finally – following the intuition of Stanisław Brzozowski*[7] *and Witold Gombrowicz*[8] *– of socio-cultural* ***immaturity*** [originally bolded by Sowa], which prevents them from defining their identity in an autonomous way, *without looking at the Other as a reference point for positive or negative idealisation* (Sowa 2011: 18). In the light of the above, in this article CEE denotes *the area marked by the Baltic Sea in the north, the Elbe and the Leitha in the west, the Danube and the Black Sea in the south and the Dnieper in the east* (Sowa 2011: 17).

Although there also seems to be no general consensus as regards finding reasons other than geographical for distinguishing CEE on the European continent, there is no doubt that the most common arguments revolve around differences of historical nature: economic development and the role of nation states (see Cobel-Tokarska 2013: 184–185).

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[6] Particularly that, as established by social ecology, physical space and its properties have a significant effect on its residents and their social organisation. Nevertheless, I do not agree with beliefs represented for example by Andrzej Chodubski who seeks to find a connection between the attitudes of Slavic peoples, i.e. primarily inhabitants of the CEE countries, and geography when he says: *The lowlands of Central and Eastern Europe define the character of its inhabitants: calm, slightly phlegmatic, rather not enterprising while strongly attached to tradition. In contrast to the inhabitants of Western Europe, their approach is rather conservative and characterised by civilisational backwardness, sometimes referred to as 'Eastern mismanagement'* (Chodubski 2016: 220).

[7] Stanisław Brzozowski (1878–1911), a Polish philosopher, writer, publicist, theatre and literary critic.

[8] Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), a Polish writer, playwright, essayist, author of such notable novels as *Trans-Atlantyk* and *Ferdydurke*, translated into several foreign languages.

When referring to economic changes in their search for CEE's specificity, researchers usually focus on processes from the late Middle Ages: diversification of the economic foundations in agriculture. While Western Europe followed the model of proto-industrialisation, or production through the putting-out (workshop) system, the CEE societies consolidated their agriculture around the subordinate work of peasants (Wandycz 1995: 15). Building on the analysis of Jeno Szucs (1990: 14–16), Christian Giordano identifies this fact as the ultimate factor responsible for the different pace of economic development across Europe, resulting (as soon as in the 15th century, onwards) in its division into its central areas and peripheries. The latter include inter alia, the countries existing in the so-called outer areas of the Old Continent: the CEE countries. Their peripheral location resulted not only in their economic underdevelopment and harsher living conditions but also in a rickety state organisation that proved incapable of withstanding external attacks from their powerful neighbours and intermittent conquerors. For the CEE nations, the notions of 'freedom' and 'exercising power' proved difficult to reconcile (Wandycz 1995: 26). The energy required to function everyday in the conditions of political coercion and the constant pressure to take up different forms of struggle in order to preserve or regain one's independent statehood (see Wandycz 1995: 25), contributed to the formation of: firstly, a specific organisation of societies around the 'mentality of a besieged Stronghold' (Marcin Król in: Wandycz 1995: 22), and, secondly, the attitude of distrust towards the state as an institution that safeguards and organises life in a community.

The far-reaching consequences of this reveal themselves not only in the different (broadly speaking) economic rationalities represented by the countries of Western Europe (centre) and CEE (peripheries). They are much more significant in terms of cultural differences between the two parts of the Old Continent. Milan Kundera[9] and Czesław Miłosz[10] summed it up most accurately when they said that Central Europe is an intellectual construct rather than a geographical one (see Bartoszewska 2007 in: Cobel-Tokarska

[9] Milan Kundera, a Czech-born (in Brno in 1929) French writer and essayist. Author of many novels (e.g. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, popularised especially by its film adaptation) which offer a critical portrait of communism.

[10] Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), a Polish poet, writer, essayist, literary historian, translator and diplomat. Laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1980).

2013: 176).[11] In my opinion, the said differences may be found both in 'high (academic) culture'[12] and 'social culture' defined as a set of dominant values or existential-normative judgments that are either widely accepted or not in a given society (Misztal 1980: 19), thus defining the institutional foundations of its social life.

Cultural distinctions of the former (high culture) have been the subject of interest of numerous scientific and cultural institutions attracting renowned intellectuals and artists.[13] Most of them, both residents of CEE and those who originate from this region but live in other parts of the world, can see a certain alienation of CEE which is suspended between the East and the West, culturally distinct from either of them (see Miłosz 2004; Zagajewski 1984: 29; Kundera 1984: 2–3). We differ from our Eastern Orthodox neighbours due to our Romano-Germanic (Western) Christian liturgy (Wandycz 1995: 12, see also Giordano 2012: 10). While its adoption provided for a cultural exchange with the West, it never resulted

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[11] In one of his essays, Kundera asks: 'What does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech or a Pole? [...] For them, the word "Europe" does not represent a geographical phenomenon but is a spiritual concept' (Kundera 1984: 3). In turn, Miłosz wrote: 'Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion. [...] The feelings and thoughts of its inhabitants must be sufficient to draw mental lines which seem to be more durable than state borders' (Miłosz 2004).

[12] Defined based on a given community's set of opinions, views, beliefs and meanings related to phenomena and objects and fully encoded in its language (Sztompka 2007: 255), as well as by works of literature, music and other fields of art (Kłoskowska 1972 in: Jawor 2009: 20).

[13] For example, in Poland there are separate scientific centres that deal exclusively with the art of CEE e.g. the Department of Central and Eastern European Art (Polish Institute of World Art Studies). In 2013, a conference 'The Search for Cultural Identity in Central and Eastern Europe' took place in Toruń, and one year later an international scientific conference 'Central and Eastern Europe: History, Culture, Literature, Language. An Intercultural Analysis' was held at the University of Warsaw. Another interesting academic institution focused on CEE is Central European University established in Prague in 1991 (relocated to Budapest in 1993), which educates scientists, politicians and civil society leaders with the aim to build open and democratic societies (https://www.ceu.edu/). The Department of Central European Studies operates at Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic), while the University of Miskolc (Hungary) runs its Central European Studies programme. Many academic centres offer faculties and specialisations which promote (and often affirm) CEE, such as Eastern studies, Slavic studies and Balkan studies (see Cobel-Tokarska 2013: 189).

in a complete unification.[14] Although Western intellectual (structuralism, existentialism) and artistic (surrealism, symbolism) trends penetrated the culture of CEE, they never really claimed it 'for good'. As the Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz said, the culture of our region of Europe is preoccupied with its own history where national values are considered to be synonymous with universal freedom values and where one can feel the presence of Marxist ideology which is responsible for CEE's ethos of work and expectations towards the state (see Miłosz 2004). Milan Kundera also pointed to culture and its much greater significance in the CEE countries (small nations whose existence may be questioned at any time), both in the times of crisis and struggling for independence and in the times of peace – the culture that is constantly threatened by the East (identified with Russia), is distrustful of History (always written by the winners), apotheosises Slavs (the myth of the 'Slavic soul' associated with Russian culture) and is marginalised by the West (Kundera 1984: 6–14).[15] Both quotations from these two outstanding writers – albeit controversial, perhaps overtly generalising and certainly not in compliance with the criterion of empirical reliability – seem to reflect, better or worse, the specificity of the intellectual (humanistic) culture of CEE countries.

Even more has been said and written, particularly in recent decades, about the specificity of its trends in art.[16] For example, it is noted that while

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[14] The adoption of Christianity in the 9th and 10th centuries by the CEE countries paved the way for contacts and cultural exchange with the West as well as taking over of Western standards. The Romano-Germanic (Western) Christian liturgy clearly distinguishes the CEE countries from their neighbours in the East where the Orthodox Church plays a prominent role (Wandycz 1995: 12, see also Giordano 2012: 10).

[15] His mistrust of Russia, perhaps all too visible in the statement quoted here, which Kundera was repeatedly accused of (see Kis et al. 1984: 23), might have been a result of his orientation toward Western readers who were the first to recognise and appreciate him as a writer.

[16] The Polish publishing market offers an abundance of such publications, e.g. Awangarda i krytyka. Kraje Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej [Avant-garde and Critique. Countries of Central and Eastern Europe] (2015) edited by Jakub Kornhauser, Michalina Kwiecik and Małgorzata Szumna (on avant-garde movements); Całkowita rewolucja. Status przedmiotów w poezji surrealizmu [Total Revolution. The Status of Objects in Surrealist Poetry] (2015) by Jakub Kornhauser (on experimental literature and surrealist poetry of CEE); Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej 1918–1939 [Modernisations. Art and Architecture in the New States of

the French New Wave focused primarily on searching for new aesthetics in cinema, its Czechoslovak and Polish counterparts were inseparable from historical and social themes.[17] The avant-garde movements in literature or music, unlike in the West, frequently referred to national values and/or folklore.[18] In addition, it is worth stressing the existence of publications specialising in the literature of the former Eastern Bloc countries as well as numerous exhibitions, websites, music, film, theatre and other festivals which promote cultural works from CEE.[19] In the light of this, one must

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Central and Eastern Europe 1918–1939] (2010) by Andrzej Szczerski (on modernist architecture in communist countries); and Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989 (2005) by Piotr Piotrowski, published also in English as In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989 (2011). Similar studies are also available by authors from other countries, e.g. Local Strategies. International Ambitions. Modern Art and Central Europe 1918–1968. Papers from the International Conference (2006) by Vojtěch Lahoda (ed.) and The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context (2018) by Isabel Wünsche (ed.), with the latter also containing texts about art in CEE.

[17] As evidenced by their leading representatives and their well-known films, e.g.: Miloš Forman (The Firemen's Ball from 1967, Loves of a Blonde from 1965) and Jiří Menzel (Closely Watched Trains from 1966, Larks on a String from 1969) in the Czech cinema; Andrzej Wajda (Ashes and Diamonds from 1958, Kanal from 1957) and Andrzej Munk (Eroica from 1957, Passenger from 1963) in the Polish cinema.

[18] For example, Karol Szymanowski and Béla Bartók, included among the greatest composers of the 20th century, made references to national values and folklore in their music (Polish music of Podhale and the music of Hungarian peasants).

[19] It is a very long list but I would like to name just a few. For example, publishers: Central European University Press, Jantar Publishing; exhibitions: Europa. Europa. Das Jahrhundert Der Avantgarde In Mittel- Und Osteuropa (1995, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn), Street Art in Central Europe (2013, Alliance Française, Łódź), Tomáš Rafa: New Nationalisms (2017, MoMa PS1, New York), Marina Pinsky / Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More (2018, Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art); websites: Panorama Kultur (www.pk.org.pl), Central Publishing (http://central-publishing.com/), Interreg Central Europe (https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/home.html); festivals: International Music Festival of Central-Eastern Europe 'Eufonie' (National Centre for Culture Poland, Warsaw), International Dance Theatre Festival 'Zawirowania' (Czech Centres, Warsaw), goEast Festival of Central and Eastern Film (Germany); and popular culture events: Bałkańska Potupajka (concerts of Balkan music) in various places in Poland, Visegrad Wave in Czeremcha. Platform Culture – Central Europe (PC-CE) is an interesting institution whose aim is to 'preserve the common civilisational heritage of the CEE countries, conduct cultural dialogue between societies

agree with the words of the Czech intellectual Jiří Trávníček, who said: *If one were to rigorously adhere to historical and geopolitical criteria, it would be difficult to distinguish it* [Central and Eastern Europe, AD *so clearly. However, if you look at it through a slightly different prism, the prism of culture, one can speak of such distinction* (Cobel-Tokarska 2013: 184).

No cultural perspective would be possible without referring to the basic values that define the axiological foundations of the European Union. In accordance with the Treaty on European Union (Article 2 'Main values of the Union'), its fundamental values include: respect for human dignity, the rule of law, democracy, freedom, equality and respect for human rights (including the rights of persons belonging to minorities).[20] The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (adopted with the Treaty of Nice in 2000) further stresses the importance of democracy and the rule of law.[21] Focusing on the value of human dignity (Jedlecka 2013: 17), the consequent abolishing of capital punishment (Pawłowicz 2012: 66–67) is an approach which – compared to Western European countries – is shared clearly by a minority in CEE while the resistance to the right to euthanasia is here much stronger.[22] This breach from the EU's fundamental values may be seen to a larger degree in the ambivalent attitude of citizens of the CEE countries

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and support the implementation of bilateral and multilateral cultural projects focused on the common CEE interests'); sources: https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/6-cultural-final.pdf, https://www.msz.gov.pl/pl/polityka_zagraniczna/dyplomacja_publiczna/platform_culture_central_europe.

[20] http://www.pte.pl/pliki/1/1066/09_Puzio-Wac3awik.doc%29.pdf (accessed on 1 January 2019).

[21] https://www.ms.gov.pl/Data/Files/_public/bip/prawa_czlowieka/onz/karta.pdf, C 83/391.

[22] The available empirical data shows that more than a half of the population in the Czech Republic, Belarus, Latvia and Hungary accepts death penalty. Between 1999 and 2008, the acceptance levels for euthanasia increased: slightly – in Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Macedonia; and significantly – in Spain. It can therefore be noticed that in the CEE countries the vector of this axiological contradiction is opposite to that in the countries of Western Europe (where acceptance levels are higher for euthanasia but lower for death penalty). Interestingly, the countries which legalised euthanasia (the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg) were also among the first to abolish death penalty.

Source: http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/page/atlas-of-european-values-1.html (accessed on 19 September 2018).

to democracy. While they express their approval for the democratic form of governance, they generally expect that the state will play an active part in determining the rules of social life, which results in their greater acceptance of the authoritarian rule compared to the countries of 'Old Europe' (Bartkowski 2012: 238–241).[23]

The differences in the economic development and culture of our region of Europe, generally believed to stand behind its peripheral status, in my opinion have an impact on how its social life is organised, in particular in the institutional dimension. On the one hand, I am referring here to the already mentioned attitude to the institution of the state, which in the CEE countries is perceived as a foreign structure that is not citizen-friendly and is a poor representative of the society's interests. On the other hand, the CEE citizens are affirmative of the institution of family which is believed to be just as important as the state – if not more – for laying the foundations for life in a community. Although the past 50 years have brought a significant transformation in CEE's family life models (reduced tendency to marry, delayed marriages and parenthood, lower fertility rates, increasing childlessness, rise in cohabitation, higher risk of relationships breaking up, etc. [Matysiak 2014; Kotowska and Jóźwiak 2012])[24], undoubtedly these changes occur here more slowly and are more superficial than in the western part of Europe.[25] Additionally, despite these

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[23] In their study, Jacek Kucharczyk and Agnieszka Łada present interesting data which shows that most of the respondents denying that democracy is the best possible political system (29%) recruited from young Poles and Hungarians. Sceptical attitude toward democracy often correlated with scepticism toward European integration. Also, acceptance levels for populism and opposition against the EU migration policy were higher among young Poles compared for example to their German peers (Kucharczyk and Łada 2017: 19–21).

[24] In the CEE countries, similarly to other regions of Europe, this is an effect of changes to universal systems of values (rejection of traditional values in favour of postmodern ones and the adoption of an individualistic lifestyle, see Matysiak 2014: 11), but also (to a much greater extent than in Western countries) of economic deficiencies (low earnings, housing problems, etc.).

[25] In CEE, they were recorded on a larger scale only after 1989 (Młynarska 2014: 19) because [...] *The adjustment of institutions and labour market structures to the growing involvement of women in the labour market is here a much slower process; just like the changes to the system of standards and values that apply to family and cultural gender roles* (Kotowska and Jóźwiak 2012: 13).

alterations, family and family-related qualities continue to be among the most desirable existential values in CEE, determining the quality of life in all areas of residence (rural-urban) and social groups (young-old, poor-rich, etc.), similarly to how it used to be in the times before the political transformation.[26]

Being aware of the obvious simplifications and unavoidable exaggerations (particularly in this field), I cannot help but notice the incommensurability of both cultural areas that have coexisted with each other (sometimes better, sometimes worse) throughout this process of the *longue durée*. There are discrepancies which do not seem to shrink despite globalisation and (even more so) the processes of transformation and European integration. In fact, recently they have probably started to grow, sometimes leading to collisions, the consequences of which may be difficult to predict but are likely to prove negative for the common future of Europeans.[27]

Is there truly no alternative to this pessimistic scenario forecasted by Bielska and Wróblewski as well as Michalska and Zwęglińska in their analyses published in Eastern European Countryside? Do we condemn ourselves to remaining the periphery of Europe by stressing our distinctness and the said dissimilarities in a belief that it will strengthen our identity? Additionally, even if we do, does it have to be synonymous with civilisational backwardness and being the weaker, less efficient engine of Europe that only slows it down on its journey towards – also differently understood – fuller integration?

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[26] These differences in the approach to family values may be well illustrated by the example of same-sex marriages: while most citizens in the countries of Western Europe do not object them, in our part of Europe the vast majority of people (regardless of their age) defines marriage only as a relationship between a man and a woman. Source: http://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/ (accessed on 01.01 2019).

[27] Values, both those called universal and those that lie at the core of united Europe, may serve as an example of such 'collision' course. The CEE countries are becoming increasingly critical of relativism which has supposedly dominated the countries of 'Old Europe'. This may be seen in the growing popularity of statements calling for replacing relativism with normative ethics which is treated like an antidote to all evil (see M. Sztaba, p. 344). However, it is noteworthy that a rise in anti-relativistic tendencies is visible not only in the CEE countries but also in Germany, Finland and the Netherlands.

In lieu of a summary: On the benefits of diversity

In this polemic with intellectuals who criticise us (Europeans from CEE) for being a periphery of Europe (i.e. for drifting away from the so-called mainstream), the strongest argument in my opinion is a well-established thesis which says that our continent is a community of the *longue durée*, diverse nations and traditions which have continued to penetrate each other for ages. In fact, Europe itself is recognised as a separate continent based on cultural and historical features embedded in the same axiological core. They prevail over the geographical determinants which otherwise would dictate to treat Europe and Asia as a single continent. Beata Bielska and Michał Wróblewski quite rightly speak of European identity being built based on a contrast to *what Europe is not* (Bielska and Wróblewski 2017: 10). CEE fulfils this criterion of community identity more than sufficiently. Despite functioning [...] *simultaneously in the world of barbaricum, within the reach of Roman Christianity and a less developed economy* (Cobel-Tokarska 2012: 175), it fits in the project of integration perfectly because after all the European Union builds its potential on disparities as demonstrated by its motto *United in diversity*.

This diversity of our civilisation community provides interesting opportunities for economic development which – quite understandably so, as after all in case of people it is 'being that determines their consciousness' – constitutes the focal point of interest in public debate and social practice, mainly due to the well-established universe of *homo economicus*. As rational beings who strive to have their needs met to the highest possible level while also being aware that it would be impossible without cooperation with others, as Europeans (both those from the Centre and us from the Peripheries) – we are deeply interested in broad economic cooperation. Naturally, there is an abundance of evidence and relatively easily available statistical data and methods to analyse advantages (and possible losses) from European integration, both for 'us' from the Peripheries and 'them' from the Centre. Data quoted most frequently concerns trade. In virtually all EU member states (with the exception of Malta and the United Kingdom), internal trade (among the EU countries) dominates over the external one (with non-EU countries) and is the highest in the CEE countries (over 70%).[28]

[28] Detailed data on the intra-EU trade and EU's international trade partners may be

Another important, albeit more controversial, example of benefits from the economic integration of Europe is economic migration. Freedom of movement among the EU member states, generally perceived as one of the most significant achievements of the European integration, has resulted in labour mobility on the scale never observed before – particularly after 2004, when primarily the CEE countries joined the EU following its subsequent enlargements. Eurostat (January 2017) estimates the number of intra-EU movers (migrants) in the last 10 years at around 17 million, with Romanians and Poles contributing the most.[29] While from the social point of view economic migration in itself is hardly a desirable value[30], it has played a key role in ensuring a greater stability of the EU labour market. To put it in simple terms, it has minimised labour shortages caused by population aging in 'Old Europe', providing for lower unemployment rates and thus a higher standard of living in 'New Democracies' (see Matuszczyk 2017).

While it is relatively easy (mainly due to hard statistical data) to discuss the benefits of economic cooperation, capturing measurable advantages from the interpenetration of cultures of the Peripheries and the Centre poses a much more difficult task. Unfortunately, an in-depth analysis of this interesting but highly complex issue lies outside the purview of this article. Nevertheless, based only on the said similarities of the CEE countries in terms of artistic styles, initiatives and intellectual trends, one can easily notice that they focus on searching for ways and means to build the common identity of the Continent. Even if they sometimes construct it in opposition to the other (see Sowa 2011: 18), they only do it to complete its picture as a whole.

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found in Eurostat reports (Eurostat Statistics Explained) available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_trade_in_goods/en#Dane_.C5.BAr.C3.B3d.C5.82owe_tablic_i_wykres.C3.B3w_.28MS_Excel.29 (accessed on 1 January 2019).

[29] The largest groups of EU immigrants include Romanians in Spain, Portugal and Italy, and Poles in Denmark, Ireland, Iceland and the United Kingdom.

Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migrant_population:_almost_22_million_non-EU_citizens_living_in_the_EU (accessed on 01.01.2019).

[30] Firstly, many EU citizens are forced to migrate mainly for economic reasons. Secondly, it brings a lot of negative social consequences, most notably the destruction of family bonds (Puzio-Wacławik 2010: 189).

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