

## **TOWARDS EUROPEAN REGIONAL IDENTITY: EUROPE VERSUS THE WEST**

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Recent war in Iraq has had a significant influence on dividing Europe. The somewhat contentious Donald Rumsfeld's statement about "new" and "old" Europe has taken root not only in the public domain of Great Britain and other West European countries but also in Eastern Europe. Countries such as Lithuania and Poland, members of the European Union since May 2004, showed their solidarity not with Germany and France, the key European Union's states, but with the United States.

One can argue that this division of Europe has proved to be short-lived. For one thing, it certainly did not have any effect on the enlargement of 2004. Nonetheless the fact that there is a fundamental difference in the public perception of America in Eastern and Western Europe poses fundamental questions about European identity, Europe's and America's transatlantic relations, and the nature of international relations in the post-9/11 world.

The differences between how America and the war in Iraq were perceived in Western and Eastern Europe are instructive here. It can be demonstrated by comparing how the public reacted to G. W. Bush's visits to Lithuania and to the United Kingdom.

A few days before the November 2002 NATO summit in Prague George W. Bush visited Lithuania. In his public address to Lithuanian people, gathered in Rotušės square in Vilnius, he reaffirmed Lithuania's invitation to join NATO as the guarantee of peace, security and freedom. Public reaction was euphoric. Even during his short address Bush was interrupted many times by loud applause and repetitive exclamations of "Thank you". Loyalty to the United States was soon demonstrated during the conflict in Iraq. The war was supported not only by the government. It was widely approved by the general public as well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The poles in Lithuania before and during the war in Iraq indicated that more than 57 % of population supported American and British military operation and almost 75 % believed that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was an imminent threat to the world (Veidas, No. 9, 28/02/2003).

A year later Bush's official state visit to the United Kingdom was met by the British public rather differently. During the visit the centre of London was paralysed by numerous anti-Bush demonstrations and peace rallies. Their message was not "Thank you America", but "Stop Bush!"

Eastern Europe's pro-American stance (first in the form of the Vilnius 10 statement<sup>2</sup> and then by the similar declaration from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) showed that, despite East Europe's integration into the European Union, it nonetheless sees the United States as its main ally, at least as far as foreign policy is concerned.

Lithuanian intellectual Tomas Kavaliauskas observed that on the economic level, Lithuania trusts old Europe and submits to the directives of Brussels. Nevertheless, on the political level, Lithuania figured out connotations of a Chirac–Schroeder–Putin political trinity. While Lithuanian politician Rolandas Pavilionis, who has been against Lithuania's integration into NATO, was calling his nation for creativity instead of armament and with a serious face on local TV raised the question "Who threatens Lithuania?", implying that Russia is no longer a threat, Vilnius had wise enough politicians who realized that in Moscow there are enough deputies (Members of the Russian Duma) who are still thinking along the lines of "lost" territories, but who are unable to get them "back" merely because of their current inability to act imperialistically in the Baltic region<sup>3</sup>.

The priority of NATO over the European Union, Washington over Brussels, has historical reasons in Eastern Europe. A little more than a decade ago East European countries were part of the Eastern block created through the Soviet occupation and repression.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union it was more than natural that countries such as Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary saw NATO and the U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> During heated discussions in the UN in November 2002 the Vilnius 10, which was formed in 2000 when Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia decided to form a coalition in seeking to join NATO, issued a statement in support of the U.S. military attack on Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> See Tomas Kavaliauskas's paper 'Visegrad, NATO and EU' in Eurozine: [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com).

as the only feasible option to secure their independence. But it is not only that. Apart from a possible imperialistic threat from the Eastern neighbour, a prospect of joining NATO and the EU for the post-communist countries meant re-entering the Western world. The ambition to become a part of the West and cultural self-identification with the West determined their pro-American and pro-European orientation. Furthermore, post-Communist transition from the planned economy of the Soviet authoritarianism to free-market economy and democracy has taken place under the banner of “transition to the West”. What is peculiar that the United States and NATO rather than the European Union become more important in Eastern Europe’s ambition to become a part of the Western world. NATO and the United States were perceived by the occupied Eastern European nations as representing the West much more than such European countries as France and Germany. Thus a pro-American stance in Eastern Europe during the Iraq crisis was partly a result of this peculiar cultural-political orientation: we cannot support a position which is also supported by our traditional enemy in the East and we back the United States because the U.S. with NATO is a true bastion of Western values.

Such pro-American position, although fairly understandable, nonetheless often lacks critical and rational scrutiny. And this was especially the case during the crisis in Iraq. Public debate in Lithuania, as well as other Eastern European countries, was not so much about whether the U.S. led war in Iraq was morally and legally justifiable, but about how to balance between two powers – Brussels and Washington. If Brussels sought support from Moscow, Eastern Europe could only support Washington. This, however, was not the case in West European countries where public scrutiny and deliberation about the war in Iraq was a daily routine. Despite the fact that some Western European governments supported the U.S., the public in Western Europe was far more sceptical about the U.S. led war in Iraq. Especially it was the case in the United Kingdom.

Public’s dissatisfaction with the Bush administration in the UK and other West European countries began well before the war in Iraq. There are many reasons for this. One of them is the Bush administration’s attitude towards environmental issues, in particular, global warming. The U.S. – a country which produces over 30 percent of greenhouse gases and thus is the

world's largest contributor to the global warming – pulled out from Kyoto agreement in 2001. Another example is how the Bush administration treats the prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Since the beginning of war on terror the U.S. administration have deliberately imprisoned terrorist suspects outside the U.S. territory in order to avoid treating them as war prisoners in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Furthermore, the U.S. annual defence budget has reached \$ 400 billions which amounts to half of the world's military spending, but it refuses to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty<sup>4</sup>. America claims to promote free-trade but applies tariffs on import from other countries and promotes protectionism (e.g. America's introduced tariffs on European steel industry).

It is not surprising that the war in Iraq was met by the West European public with great scepticism. First of all, the U.S. administration's attempt to see itself as the world's liberator from tyrannies can hardly be acceptable to European political culture. Europe was unfortunate enough to experience the rise and fall of oppressive totalitarian regimes during the last century, which were based on ideology and rhetoric full of messianic promises. Bush's Texas-like Christian semi-fundamentalist rhetoric about good against evil, "you either with us or against us", and "the axis of evil" caused both disbelief and dissatisfaction in Europe. This type of rhetoric, coupled with the alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, was employed by the U.S. government to convince the world that the war in Iraq was necessary. The failure to answer the questions – why should it be Iraq rather than any other tyrannical regime; or why the international community has to accept America's right to wage wars whenever and wherever – led many Europeans to doubt the sincerity of America's motivation to go to war.

It was similarly difficult to accept the U.S. administration's claim that Saddam's regime harboured and supports terrorism and the alleged programme of WMD posed an imminent threat to the world. It becomes more obvious if we look closer at Blair's decision to support Bush. UK's position was exclusively based on the argument that Iraq possessed WMD. In this sense Blair's political rhetoric was more European than American. In his campaign for war Blair did not argue that the war was aimed at regime change – the

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<sup>4</sup> New Statesman, 17 November 2003, p. 6.

only reason for attacking Iraq, according to the British government, was the threat of Saddam's WMD programme. Furthermore, Blair tried to convince Bush to take the UN route and to seek international community's approval. It was important to Blair and the British government because they could expect public's support if the war was sanctioned by the UN and international law. However, attempts made to convince British public opinion failed. This also seriously damaged Blair's and British government's reputation<sup>5</sup>.

There are several important conclusions to be drawn from these events. The war in Iraq showed that the transatlantic friendship between Europe and America can no longer be taken for granted. The enormous price that Blair had to pay for supporting America illustrates this well. The Atlantic divide is growing and will continue to become bigger because of the growing cultural and political differences between Europe and America<sup>6</sup>.

With further European integration this division will become bigger. In the nearest future the European Union will be preoccupied with its huge cultural and political diversity brought about by enlargement. Dealing with these political complexities will require enormous political, cultural and financial resources. An ever closer European integration is likely to foster a unique political culture and, hopefully, a stronger European identity.

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<sup>5</sup> In September 2002, the British government published Iraq weapons dossier alleging that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that they could be launched in 45 minutes. An enormous controversy was caused when BBC's reporter Andrew Gilligan announced that the dossier was "sexed up" by the government's chief spin-doctor Alastair Campbell. The conflict between BBC and government resulted in leaking weapons' expert Dr David Kelly's name as the source of Gilligan's report. Unable to cope with political pressure and publicity Dr Kelly committed suicide. And although Lord Hutton's enquiry vindicated Blair's government, the shadow over Blair and his moral credibility still daunts him today.

<sup>6</sup> The United States' changing demographical makeup suggests that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be less dominated by the whites of European descent because of increasing immigration from Latin America and Asia which will gradually but inevitably change the United States' European/Western identity. The 1960 population of the U.S. was almost 90% white; today it is about 75 %, and demographers project that by 2020 it will be approximately 60 % and by 2030 it may constitute less than half of those under eighteen (see Christopher Coker *Twilight of the West*. Oxford: Westview Press, 1998, p. 129).

On the other hand, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and 9/11 radically changed the nature of international relations. Today there is no obvious enemy, which could unite and give reasons for the close friendship between Europe and America. And it was precisely this friendship that gave the basis for formation and existence of the West. Christopher Coker has convincingly argued that the concept of 'the West', which emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and became widespread during and after the First and Second World Wars, was always juxtaposed to and depended on that which was considered to be non-West – the Orient, authoritarian Russia, Nazi Germany, and the Communist Soviet Union<sup>7</sup>.

'The West' from the very beginning has been both a cultural and political term. It is possible to trace its emergence back to the ideas of the French Enlightenment. The Enlightenment ideals of political liberty and universal humanity, which were most evidently expressed through revolutions in America and France, became essential elements in the formation of, what was later called, 'Western civilisation'. What is important, however, is that the West emerged as an alliance between leading European powers, first of all France and Britain, and the United States, in order to defend 'freedom' and 'human civilisation' against tsarist and later Communist Russia.

One of the first thinkers to foresee this was the 19<sup>th</sup> century French historian Jules Michelet who envisaged the importance of a Western alliance between Europe and America in order to withstand Russia as their common enemy<sup>8</sup>. This became especially evident during the Cold War when the world was fundamentally divided between the 'capitalist West' and the 'Communist East'. It was then that the concept of 'the West' became not only clearly defined, but also embodied in NATO as the political and military alliance between North America and the West European liberal democracies. Thus up to 1989 'the West' was simply all those modern liberal democracies that adopted a free-market economy/capitalism and saw themselves as in ideological opposition to the Soviet Union.

Today the situation is different. Our common threat of terrorism cannot unite "the civilised Western world" in the way the Warsaw pact once united

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<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid*, pp. 11-21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

the West. In this sense Francis Fukuyama was right when he famously claimed that the collapse of Communism would result in the end of the history of the ideologically divided world<sup>9</sup>. It was in a similar manner that Ralf Dahrendorf wrote that the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe should not result in the necessity for these societies to learn the language of “the West”. Free European societies do not coincide with any single system and have no single language. Instead, they constitute an open space with all its variety and multiplicity, and thus the 1989 revolution in Europe is precisely the enlargement of this space<sup>10</sup>. But if so, then is not the “West”, understood as militant capitalism coupled with liberal democracy which “should” be exported to the rest of the world, a part of the Cold War ideological constellation? If the answer is “yes”, then another conclusion becomes inevitable. Liberal democracy and the endorsement of free market institutions can be conceptually separated from the “West” as semi-ideological concept. Thus a lesson that one can draw from both Dahrendorf and Fukuyama is to suggest that the gradual adaptation of (liberal) democracy and free-market institutions within the global world go far beyond the boundaries of the West.

Needless to say, the nature of this conclusion is more theoretical than a realistic reflection on today’s political reality.

Lithuanian and other East European countries do see the European Union as the institution of the West, the West as a *coherent* cultural and political domain. For them joining NATO and the European Union has always been one and the same aim. Furthermore, Britain’s traditional friendship with America and its reluctance towards closer European integration show the strong relationship between America and Europe still being prevalent today.

Nevertheless, my contention here is that if Europe is to rediscover its common European identity, an identity which would be based on more or less coherent cultural values, then it has to stop seeing itself as the bastion of Western culture and civilisation.

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<sup>9</sup> See Francis Fukuyama ‘The End of History?’ in *National Interest*, 16, Summer, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> See Ralf Dahrendorf *Reflection of the Revolution in Europe*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1990.

The concept of “the West” has become barren simply because there can hardly be such a thing as “the Western civilisation” today. Globalisation, the gradual expansion of the Enlightenment’s political ideals and modernisation of the world, the end of the Cold War, the world-wide endorsement of liberal democratic reforms and market economy, postcolonial and post–modern multiculturalism, all of these phenomena make us wonder whether there is any coherent conceptual content behind “the West”.

The divide between “new” and “old” Europe and the lack of common European cultural identity may cause many disagreements and difficulties in forming common European policies within the enlarged European Union of 25. If Europe and America are going to drift further apart in the future, the new Eastern member–states will need to rethink their political and cultural orientation.

Similarly, France and Germany will have to rethink their position too as their political weight within the enlarged European Union is becoming less significant. What is truly at stake, is Europe’s political and cultural identity in the rapidly changing world. To cherish its unique national diversity and common culture Europe needs to get back to its European rather than Western roots.

Therefore, instead of perceiving its integration into the European Union as an accession to the West, it would be far better for Eastern Europe to accept a more European stance. I believe it would make more sense if Lithuanians, Poles or Hungarians, instead of identifying themselves with the West, would seek to become what they already are – Europeans.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who, more than a hundred years ago, urged us to be good Europeans. And no one in Europe’s intellectual history is more qualified to do so than Nietzsche. There is hardly anyone who was more concerned about the fate of European culture and its identity than Nietzsche.

Maybe East Europeans would understand that their true ally is not America but the neighbouring European countries – growing and expanding Europe, which is rich in its culture, arts, and national diversity. This would encourage us to rethink the world order not in terms of the old-fashioned ‘free and civilised West’ versus the rest of the world, but in terms of regional cultural identities: Europe, Americas, India, Arab countries, etc.