

'EUROPE' AND 'WEST': SHIFTING IDENTITIES

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AT THE SOURCE OF DEBATE



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How do we tell whether a country belongs to the West and Europe? What are European values? It is very hard to answer these questions. First there is an obvious problem here with how we define 'European' and 'Western.' Both concepts are, of course Western. Both, too, have long and complex histories.

The idea of the 'West' was originally a geographical one — pretty much all those lands to the west of the Dardanelles — it

came, by the late 18c. to mean Europe plus Europe's overseas settler populations — and in particular after 1776 the United States. **The key feature of this West was its political institutions — not yet democratic but what might be broadly called 'representative.'**

Neither Russia, which was looked upon as a kind of 'enlightened despotism' nor Turkey — or rather the Ottoman Empire — which had been the 'Oriental Despotism' *par excellence* since the fall of Constantinople, initially, at least, counted as part of the 'West.' Ever since the sixteenth century, Russia — as the last bastion of an independent Christian Orthodox Church — saw itself as the natural heir of the Roman Empire in the East. 'The Christian Empires have fallen,' wrote the monk Philotheus in 1512 to the Czar Basil III, 'in their stead stands only the Empire of our ruler....Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands and a fourth there will not be....Thou art the only Christian sovereign in the world, the lord of all faithful Christians.' Hence, Russia's position was thus always highly ambiguous, both half in and half out of whatever definition of the West one cared to give. **Russia regarded itself a Western and a European power, however, the European countries did not regard Russia as such.**

During the nineteenth century a concept emerged in international law which divided the world into 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' nations. Put very simply:

'Civilized' nations were those who were bound by international law, and the uncivilized were those who were not. And those 'civilized nations' were the ones which made up the West. Russia, as one of the 'Great Powers,' ever since 1815, clearly belonged among the 'civilized nations' and therefore also clearly belonged to the West. The Ottoman Empire, however, clearly did not. (Ironically, by the Treaty of Paris of 1856, the Ottoman Empire was rewarded for its part in defeating Russia in the Crimean War by being formally included in the family of 'civilized nations.')

After World War II, of course the 'West' became a term for the US and its allies in opposition to the Soviet Union, and its allies or associates. And this raised some severe problems at the edges: was India part of the West, was Japan?

However, Russia, or the Soviet Union to be more precise, was removed from the family of European states. Communism and Soviet ambitions in the developing world removed Russia from the democratization process that characterized the development of Western countries after World War I.

Today the 'West' is a club of democratic states, but it is also more or less what it was in the 18 c.: Europe, plus those areas of the world colonized and settled by Europeans: the U.S., South America, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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‘Europe’ is another matter. Until recently, defining Europe has been more a question of culture than anything else. The great 19 c. Italian nationalist Carlo Cattaneo once **described Europe as those lands which had at one time been united by the Christian religion, the Latin language, and Roman law.** And something of this still survives to this day. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s attempt to have the Christian religion made a defining part of ‘Europe’ in the now defunct Constitution of 2004, is indicative of this. Sarkozy has frequently alluded to the need for Europe to assert its Christian identity, which is usually interpreted, correctly, both as an attempt to win over the votes of the National Front, and as a counter to the Muslims who need no encouragement to assert *their* faith. **The states of the European Union may be secular but their culture still supposes a strong, if withering, Christian component.** This is also certainly one of the unstated reasons why Sarkozy appears to be more hostile to Turkish entry into the Union than other European leaders.

Russia’s laws and Russia’s language owe nothing to Rome, but Russia has, ever since Peter the Great who, in Montesquieu’s words, ‘gave European customs to a European people,’ been a part of Europe – a distant part perhaps, but no more so than say Scandinavia or Ireland. On cultural grounds, to my mind, **it is at least less absurd to think of Russia as ‘European’ then it is to think of Greece.** Greece had to be admitted to the Union because no-one could conceive of leaving out the ‘home of democracy.’ But modern liberal democracy is not Athenian democracy, and modern Greece is not Hellas, for all the Hellenic nationalism which has grown up since 1821, but a former province of the Ottoman Empire. On that score, Israel – also a former Ottoman province with modern democratic institutions – should also be included. ■

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RUSSIA AND TURKEY IS JUST NON-EUROPE



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Neither Russia nor Turkey can be considered as Western countries. Turkey is not a European country *a priori*, due to its Muslim confession. Russia, on the other hand, is primarily a Christian country, and it is Christianity that mainly binds Russia to the West. However, there is a distinct difference between the Russian and Western versions of Christianity. Apart from Christianity, Russia and the West are also bound by the enormous influence that Europe and the West have been exerting on Russia over the last century, including the adaptation of our country to what is commonly referred to as the ‘Western idea’.

At the same time, the Russian political system is absolutely different from the Western one. The Russian political system has its own specific traits, just as the French, the Italian and the Turkish political systems do. Just like all countries of the world, Russia is following its own distinct path and this is not the same path that Europe is pursuing.

The latter also holds true in the case of Turkey. Moreover, this is not a European country and it does not have Christian roots. Although modern-day Turkey does occupy territory that coincides with the former Christian

Byzantine Empire, today Turkey is an Islamic country. While it is considered to be a secular country, this is the case no more so than other countries with a Muslim population. Islam is a religion that is related to Christianity, but its interpretations of the human being, of the nature of one’s personality, the law, morality, family relations, the economy and power differ from those that are espoused by Christianity.

However, being non-European countries, Russia and Turkey have been drawn into the orbit of big, primarily Western global politics for several centuries already. In various periods and to different degrees, both the Russian and the Turkish intelligentsia have been exposed to westernisation. Of course, this brings our countries closer to Europe. At the same time, this proximity has also been taking place due to various wars, confrontation and conflicts. However, Russia and Turkey are countries that are not simply ‘the other Europe’ – in fact, they are simply not part of Europe. Russia is not a part of the West nor is it part of the East; in fact, it is the North. Turkey is primarily the part of the East, which is probably as close to Europe as possible. At the same time, it is also not part of the West. ■