Thematic section
Decolonising Central and Eastern Europe

Western Orientalism Targeting Eastern Europe: An Emerging Research Programme

Mart Kuldkepp

University College London (UCL), United Kingdom, ORCiD: 0000-0002-0942-717X, corresponding address: m.kuldkepp@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This article discusses pre-existing studies of Euro-Orientalism (Orientalism directed at Eastern Europe), and advocates for further study of the inequal relationship between Europe's West and East. In this sense, this article should help to overview and advance the study this phenomenon. A better understanding of Euro-Orientalism is necessary both in order to counter epistemic injustice, and in order to promote realistic policy recommendations for the region. In this latter connection, the article argues that the West's inability to take proper account of Eastern European historical experiences contributed to its failure to prepare for Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Eastern Europe, othering, decolonisation*

First published online on 14 December 2023, issue published on 14 December 2023

Introduction

This essay argues that contemporary European and, more broadly, Western political discourses have insufficiently engaged with Eastern European points of view, and that their failure to do so has been detrimental to both Eastern European and Western national and supranational interests. It furthermore argues that this failure reflects the existence of long-standing Orientalist stereotypes about Eastern Europe as a region, and the generally negative attitudes towards the mentifact of 'Eastern-Europeanness', which itself is mostly a Western construction.

Therefore, in order to course-correct for the future, it is necessary for us to examine the flaws in this 'Euro-Orientalist' thinking. With that in mind, I will sketch out in this article what I think are some likely productive avenues for future critical inquiry into this matter and introduce some terms that might be useful in exploring them. Most of the concepts that I use have already been proposed by other scholars. A couple of them I have formulated myself.

The piece began its life as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the West's failure to anticipate and prevent the 2022–2023 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It does not itself contain a fully developed analysis of this failure, but rather puts forth a case for consolidated critical research on a certain trajectory of discursive takes on Eastern Europe that should eventually help to understand and clarify it. It also engages with what is by now a long-standing scholarly tradition of critical analysis of common stereotypes about Eastern Europe: a tradition that is very much being continued by the current generation of scholars.

What is at stake here is not just the abstract need to fight against all forms of epistemic injustice caused by accidental or wilful ignorance. Our failure to recognise and confront entrenched prejudice also has direct implications for our ability to determine the correct course of action, which is crucially important not least in critical situations where misjudgement can carry a cost in human lives. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine has strongly highlighted the need for Ukraine's partners and allies to be clear-sighted about Russia's capabilities without overestimating them, and Ukrainian resistance without underestimating it. It can also help us become better attuned to blind spots in Western attitudes towards Eastern Europe as a whole.

Orientalism and Euro-Orientalism

As demonstrated by the voluminous and well-established critical literature around Western Orientalism and colonialism, the centring of Western points of view and othering attitudes towards the East have long been commonplace features of Western social and political thinking. That this is the case is of course problematic already for moral reasons, since Western-centrism is inherently

a form of epistemic injustice (see e.g. Fricker 2007; Pohlhaus 2017) towards the out-group (Easterners, however they are defined). But at the same time, it is also something that has distorted the West's own judgement in various ways and is therefore detrimental to its collective interests, imposing costs on Western societies that could otherwise have been avoided.

Engaging with this topic, many scholars have long since recognised that Western Orientalist attitudes have not only targeted Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, although this is the main way the term has been used since the publication of Edward Said's seminal 'Orientalism' (Said 1978). There also exists another type of Western Orientalism, which is directed much closer to home: at Eastern Europe. Sometimes dubbed Euro-Orientalism (Adamovsky 2005; Bracewell 2020), this concept is different from Orientalism in the Saidian sense but does share the main features with it. In particular, it builds on the same image of a region to the east having been presented by various kinds of Western experts in an essentialised and stereotypical form, just as the extra-European Orient in Said's paradigm has been essentialised by Western Orientalists (Franzinetti 2008: 364). The real-life effects of Euro-Orientalism, especially the obstacle it presents to any genuine and open-minded Western engagement with the region, can be similar as well.

This Said-inspired term Euro-Orientalism, first introduced by Ezequiel Adamovsky (2005) in an article about French images of Eastern Europe in the 19th century, has had its perhaps most enthusiastic reception in studies of pre-20th century Europe (Franzinetti 2008; Bielousova 2022). Outside of that, it has been most widely used in Balkan studies, even if not necessarily under this moniker. In her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* (2009, first edition 1997), Bulgarian academic Maria Todorova indeed refrained from using the term Orientalism at all, instead preferring 'Balkanism' to locate its target in a particular regional context inside Europe. Pamela Ballinger (2017) has used 'easternism', which allows for a broader analysis not limited to the Balkans, and Attila Melegh has created 'East-West Slope' to point to the idea of 'gradually diminishing civilization towards the "East"' (Melegh 2006: 2). Other authors, perhaps in order to highlight more clearly the connection to the Saidian concept, have preferred to stick to some variation of the term Orientalism, modifying it as needed. One derivation has been 'Demi-Orientalization', reflecting its origins in Immanuel Wallerstein's 'semi-periphery' (Laczó 2023: 85). Another and rather successful term is Nesting Orientalisms, which has been used to underline the fact that the Euro-Orientals who are habitually othered by westerners, can and do themselves in turn exhibit similar attitudes towards yet other groups to the east, sometimes even inside their own state (Bakić-Hayden 1995: 922).

Beyond acknowledging the existence of Euro-Orientalism, however, it is in my view important to go a step further and recognise that the whole concept of

'Eastern Europe' is in fact deeply intertwined with the region's status as a perennial object of derogatory Western gaze. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (2017: 189) has noted that unlike most other European regions, 'Eastern Europe' has always almost exclusively denoted an 'other': some form of 'foreign' geographical, political and cultural space that is located 'eastwards' of one's 'own' territory and 'often charged with ambivalent or negative attributes and stereotypes'. Similarly, Wendy Bracewell (2020: 95) points out that it is a term used primarily to describe others, but very rarely as a self-description.

This fact helps to explain some central distinctive features of Euro-Orientalism, especially why Eastern Europe – while posited to exist as some form of a distinct region by the users of this term – is thereby not necessarily regarded as a genuine community with its own legitimate interests, voice and place in the international system. Rather, it tends to be cast as some form of an ill-defined space situated between the West and Russia, differentiated from the former primarily by its proximity to the latter. A malleable border zone without independent agency, Eastern Europe appears to be perpetually contested, likely to change hands and therefore with an uncertain identity and future.

The prospect that Eastern European lands might in some way be redivided or redistributed in future wars or peace treaties has thus been felt to be neither unlikely nor particularly unjust. This is furthermore shown by the fact that Western reactions when such redivision actually happened – such as during the Soviet takeover of the three independent Baltic states in 1940 – were often lukewarm. The words of Douglas MacKillop, the British consul in Riga, written on the occasion of the Soviet Union's occupation and annexation of Latvia, can be taken as representative. In a report to the Foreign Office, written on 26 July 1940, MacKillop stated that Latvian nationalism, 'a romantic aspiration, a battle cry and a crusade, had in its final manifestation become something of a racket', and that the disappearance of the three Baltic states, 'with their economic weaknesses and internal divides' could be described as 'not entirely regrettable' (Piirimäe 2014: xii). Likewise, Swedish historian Wilhelm M. Carlgren has pointed out how Sweden's decision to legally recognise the 1940 annexation of the three Baltic states as lawful – Sweden was only the second European country to do so after Nazi Germany, which at the time was a Soviet ally – was a fulfilment of distrust towards Baltic independence that went all the way back to the end of the First World War (Carlgren 1993: 48).

What are the deeper roots of such attitudes in the West? In fact, I would argue that it is exactly the lack of clarity about the extent and boundaries of Eastern Europe – rather than outright racism, as would be the case with Western Orientalisms directed at Asia, North Africa and the Middle East – that has made a crucial historical contribution to the rise of Euro-Orientalism.

Mental maps, phantom borders and lateness to modernity

In his recent monograph on Eastern European history, Ian D. Armour defines Eastern Europe as including the stretch of land from the Baltic states down to the border of Greece. This includes present-day Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, Albania, Bulgaria and the states of former Yugoslavia. 'On grounds of space and practicality', Armour notes, his book does not include Finland and 'those parts of Russia inhabited mainly by ethnic Russians' (Armour 2019: 1). Space and practicality considerations may well have been the rationale, but it seems to me that even without them, such a definition corresponds rather well to the contemporary common-sense Western definition of what Eastern Europe is, the inclusion of Austria being in that sense a far more radical step than the omission of Finland or Russia.

Of course, there can be no objectively 'correct' way of defining Eastern Europe. Instead, it is right to highlight the importance of 'mental maps': i.e. conscious (or unconscious) ways of systematising and categorising places into supposedly natural hierarchies and oppositions that at the same time tend to perpetuate imperial divisions and reproduce various ethnic and cultural stereotypes (Varga 2022, 372). The importance of these mental maps is likely the most central factor enabling us to understand what Eastern Europe is. It can be a lived experience and everyday reality for real people, but above all, it is an idea: a complex of negative stereotypes on the Western collective mind.

Nevertheless, imperial divisions, as well as ethnic and cultural stereotypes, have their own particular origins and arcs of development. These must be investigated in order to see the deeper causes of Euro-Orientalism and find ways of productively and critically engaging with it. In this connection, I would argue that the vulnerable status of Eastern Europe on Western (and not only Western) mental maps ultimately rests on the fact that the eastern boundary of Europe is naturally obscure. Unlike Europe's coasts to the north, to the south and to the west, there exists no similarly clear line of demarcation that would help an observer to determine where exactly Europe should end in the east. This means that Eastern Europe's eastern border is by necessity less of a physical and more of a mental boundary.

The same is, or at least for long stretches of time has been, the case with Eastern Europe's border in the west. There is a similar lack of physical clarity about where Europe's West should end, and its East properly begin. As a result, Eastern Europe exists in the mental map of Western imagination as a space of fluidity, where 'Westernness' and 'Easternness' have moved back and forth over time, determined by conquest, religious change, rise and demise of trade routes, and other facts of historical geopolitics. As Guido Franzinetti puts it, it is almost

impossible to use 'Eastern Europe' as a historical category 'without constantly expanding its borders, making provisos for its provisional expansion or contraction' (Franzinetti 2008: 365).

Just as the ideas about 'free Europe' and the 'despotic Orient' go back to the antiquity (Broslma et al 2019: 11–12), so do the nascent distinctions between the West and the East of Europe itself. Over time, these ideas about difference between the two have been influenced by a multitude of other events such as the Great Schism dividing Christendom into two parts, the Mongol invasion, the German 'Drang nach Osten' in the Middle Ages, the rise and fall of the Polish--Lithuanian Commonwealth and many other factors shaping the way that Europe has been conceptualised not just on the real map, but also on the collective mental maps. The exact course of this process has attracted a fair bit of scholarly attention, especially after the end of the Cold War. Since Larry Wolff's classic 1994 study *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff 1994), a voluminous literature has appeared (Confino 1994; Dupcsik 1999; Adamovsky 2005; Franzinetti 2008), looking at the earlier, especially 18th and 19th century Western ideas about Eastern Europe, and the historical turning points that had a decisive influence on their development.

One particularly important historical process that impacted Western ideas about the East of Europe was the Early Modern rise of the Russian Empire as a Great Power and a major threat replacing that of the Ottoman Empire (Bracewell 2020: 94). From that point onwards, the eastern boundary of the West could be identified with the western border of Russia, a country that itself was a target of much Western Orientalist stereotypes. But the clarity thus created by Russia's rise was hardly sufficient, as its borders kept changing over time and it kept adding new lands to its imperial possessions. Even after centuries, Russia's more recently conquered westernmost borderlands retained a linguistic, cultural and religious distinctiveness compared to Russia proper, and subsequently became the northern reaches of what is understood as Eastern Europe today. The one exception is Finland, added to the Russian Empire only in 1809, which instead (re-)claimed for itself a Nordic identity in the years following its declaration of independence in 1917, and subsequently argued against attempts to brand it as 'Baltic' (Wunsch 2006).

Further to the west and to the south, similar processes can be observed with the borderlands of other European Empires. Parts of what's today thought of as Eastern Europe included to the eastern reaches of Austria-Hungary and Germany, and the northernmost territories of the Ottoman Empire.

No matter which empire the various Eastern European lands came to belong to, they were characterised by liminality and peripherality in terms of their relationship with the imperial core. Their distinctiveness meant that they easily

attracted the suspicions of central imperial authorities, which believed that their loyalty and stability could not be fully guaranteed. Characterised, as borderlands often were, by ethnically and confessionally mixed populations, they were seen as likely areas to harbour separatist sentiments. The danger of this happening was made worse by the fact that as border regions, they were also crucially important for the defence of the rest of the empire. None of this encouraged recognition of their independent value or agency, neither inside the empire – which had a natural interest in levelling local legal, administrative and even linguistic differences – nor abroad.

Even the real-life experiences of Westerners who visited the East, seen through Orientalist prejudice, did probably more to perpetuate the negative stereotypes than contest them. An American historian of the First World War, Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, has described the bewilderment felt by German soldiers when they encountered the ethnic, linguistic and religious complexity of Eastern European lands during their occupation by Imperial Germany. It became clear to them that they could no longer think of these lands as just 'West Russia', as they had before. Instead, these were territories that had changed hands time and time again through centuries, and 'it seemed that once a thing happened, it stayed on forever, absorbed and retained, present in visible traces and echoed memories' (Liulevicius 2004: 35–36).

A recent terminological innovation that can be used to highlight the crucial importance of past and present imperial boundaries in Eastern Europe is the concept of 'phantom borders', used by Béatrice von Hirschhausen and others (Hirschhausen et al. 2019; Hirschhausen 2020; Kolosov 2020). The phantom borders – no longer present on the actual map, but still on the mental map – are seen as phenomena capable of shaping 'the experience and imagination of a social group' and consequently of establishing 'regional patterns in a specific domain' (Hirschhausen et al. 2019: 386). Not just limited to the social group itself, the phantom borders in Eastern Europe also shape the experience and imagination in the West, and this is frequently to the detriment of Eastern Europeans themselves, as it contests their hard-won independence and will to exercise independent agency without the phantom borders haunting them. One only needs to think of their displeasure at being labelled 'post-Soviet' (see e.g. Mäe 2017), especially now, more than 30 years after the collapse of the USSR. In Eastern Europe, the 'phantom borders' have retained a long-term relevance and importance, while no one would think of calling the Republic of Ireland 'post-British'.

This shows that there is a specificity to Eastern Europe's former imperial borderlands, if defined as a distinct region in a pan-European context. After all, it is not necessarily the case that borderlands are always disadvantaged in every empire: they can also be zones of dynamic growth through trade and innova-

tion, facilitated by cross-border contacts. This did not apply to Eastern Europe, however. Arguably, the one defining feature of Europe's East in the modern period has been its relative economic backwardness. Largely due to the inefficient governance and exploitative behaviour of the empires that they belonged to, the region structurally underperformed, failing to sufficiently benefit from the centres of investment and innovation that lay further to the west. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Eastern Europe was constantly late to modernisation, with abolishment of serfdom, industrialisation and urbanisation, development of modern transport links, and many other features of modernity arriving significantly later than in the West.

In scholarship, the discussion of the causes and effects of Eastern Europe's economic backwardness reaches back to the 19th century, starting most famously with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's thesis that Eastern Europe had been a latecomer to human history (Schenk 2017, 193). This discourse achieved a broader resonance when it was picked up by Immanuel Wallerstein in his 'World System' thesis, where he emphasised the importance of centre-periphery relations to explain it (Wallerstein 1974). Responses to Wallerstein on this matter culminated in a 1985 conference on the causes of economic backwardness in Eastern Europe and a 1989 edited volume (see Chirot 1989; Brenner 1989 and other chapters therein). But whatever the specific merits of Wallerstein's arguments and those of his critics, it is a fact that Eastern Europe's lateness meant that the fundamental separation between the West and the East came to be further entrenched in Western imagination in the modern period. Already by the 19th century era of high imperialism, Eastern Europe had been definitely relegated to the realm of the colonised rather than the colonisers, and to the catchers-up, rather than the innovators.

Indeed, Western negative attitudes towards Eastern Europe have probably much to do with this perceived backwardness. If we accept Ole Wæver's argument that (Western) Europe's fundamental Other is not 'the Turk, Russians, Moslems or the East' but rather Europe's own past, characterised as it was by perennial conflict and war (cited and discussed in Bialasiewicz 2012: 108), then its Orientalism towards Eastern Europe should be mapped also on time, not just on space. Ezequiel Adamovsky's description of the Eastern Europe lands as 'spaces of absence' (i.e. of Western civilisation) expresses another facet of the same idea (Adamovsky 2005). Any theoretical distinction between 'difference in time' and 'difference in space' would likely be overstating the case, however. It is more useful to highlight the ways that negative stereotypes naturally converge on mental maps, one reinforcing another.

Eastern European lateness to modernity meant lateness to economic growth and infrastructural development that were brought by the industrial revolution.

Inevitably, it also meant delayed political modernisation, which in its turn had a multitude of negative effects from encouraging emigration abroad to inhibiting the timely development of civil society and political parties.

An important consequence of this lateness was that the rise of Eastern European nationalism in the second half of the 19th century took place later than in the West. *Inter alia*, this meant that it was from the outset subjected to a critical Western gaze, which had naturally not been the case the other way around. Eastern European national movements came to be regarded on similar terms as those of the colonised nations: immature, excessive, chauvinist and therefore fundamentally dangerous and volatile. The image of Eastern European backwardness, and the idea of their immaturity in face of novel ideas, helped to delegitimise the same national movements, their aspirations towards liberation and independence seen as less important than those of the already established states, or even outright dangerous and something to be condemned or suppressed by the empires to which they belonged.

The echoes of this thinking are easily visible in the still ongoing academic discourse over negative 'ethnic' and positive 'civic' varieties of nationalism, the former being supposedly more characteristic of Eastern Europe, and the latter of the West. The 'ethnic' kind of nationalism is commonly associated with ideas of the supremacy of blood and soil, intolerance towards national minorities and, at worst, genocidal excesses. The 'civic' variety, on the other hand, is supposed to be something related to allegiance to state institutions, shared values and civic pride. However, on closer scrutiny – and especially an historically informed one – the distinction collapses, revealing that both Western and Eastern European national movements have espoused ideas and policies of both kinds, but not always at the same time. This has left the latter open to essentialising criticism from their supposed superiors. An already well-developed critical literature (e.g. Jaskułowski 2010; Bugge 2022) has appeared around this topic, and the debate can be expected to continue.

Orientalism, counter-Orientalism and positive Eastern-Europeanness

When discussing Western Orientalism towards Eastern Europe, it is important to keep in mind that it is not just a straightforwardly Western preoccupation, and Eastern Europeans are not simply passive targets of essentialising attitudes from the outside. While negative stereotypes are obviously an important reputational disadvantage and can have a damaging effect on many areas of life from national security to attracting foreign investment, there are nevertheless opportunities for resistance, as well as chances of opportunistic weaponisation of the very same stereotypes against others.

The basic fact is that it has generally been in the interests of Eastern Europeans to resist the label of 'Eastern-Europeanness' with all its connotations. This

is shown by the many examples of them instead claiming 'Central European' or 'Northern European' identity in various contexts. Estonia, for example, is very well known for trying to claim a 'Nordic' identity for itself (Kuldkepp 2023). It is important to point out that this and similar attempts at national and regional rebranding are not something frivolous, but a matter of essential national security interests. Being considered Eastern European is experienced as a liability, a form of imprisonment on the mental map of the West. Milan Kundera indeed called Eastern Europe 'the kidnapped West' (cited in Müller 2009: 117). Conversely, to become Central, Northern or Western European has meant to escape from the prison. For this reason, the Eastern European 'anxiety of incomplete belonging and not ranking high enough to merit the status of Europeanness' (Kołodziejczyk & Huigen 2023: 2), while to some extent certainly true, should not be overstated.

In hindsight misrepresented as 'search for a new identity' (see e.g. Gati 1990), the counter-Orientalist push to abandon Eastern Europeanness was particularly strong during and after the end of the Cold War, with most Eastern European states either newly independent or with recently regained independence. Recently emancipated from the Soviet colonial overlay, their need to survive dictated that they had to immediately and decisively reject any form of 'inbetweenness' that could leave them vulnerable to the threat of Russian imperial revanchism. The way to accomplish that was through alignment with the West to the greatest possible extent, which meant a constant battle against Western scepticism and pre-existing negative stereotypes trying to relegate them into some sort of grey zone between the West and Russia. Eastern European states rejecting the label of 'Eastern European' and claiming to be some other kind of European (or simply – European) was a facet of this broader programme.

Not just politicians, but also cultural figures and authors participated in the critical discourse around 'Eastern Europe' around the end of the Cold War, and even earlier. Already in 1978, writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn argued in his Harvard Commencement Address that terms like 'East' and 'West' have little to do with geography, and instead reflect forms of self-perception and one's sense of participating in one historical narrative over the other – with the curious effects of Japan becoming a distant part of the West, and Russia, owing to its special character, not quite being of the European East (cited in Paloff 2014: 689). Milan Kundera, too, made similar comments on many occasions, stating in 1984, for example, that countries considered Eastern European have not adopted the Eastern European vision so much as they have been co-opted by it (ibid.).

However, this does not mean that all or even most Eastern Europeans necessarily rejected the existence of the region as such. More commonly, the way that the rejection of this label has taken place is by reimagining the region's borders

in a way that would exclude one's own nation, but still leave some more unfortunate others in the not-quite-European sphere. Maria Mälksoo has made good use of the concept of Nesting Orientalisms to demonstrate how Russia and its former Eastern European satellite states have engaged in a mnemopolitical othering competition, trying to depict each other as 'less European' and simultaneously gain Western recognition of their own 'more European' character (Mälksoo 2013).

Finally, it is important to point out that even when successful, the programme of rejection of Eastern-Europeanness has come with a collective cost. The post-Cold War wish to align with the West directly translated into Eastern European willingness to become rule-takers from the West, which reflected their readiness for self-denial when their historical memory of e.g. World War II or recent experiences of colonialism did not align with Western norms of appropriateness (Broslma et al 2019: 15). Needing to counter Orientalist stereotypes of Easterners being immature, emotional, aggressive, backwards, nationalistic etc., Eastern Europeans could ill-afford expressions of views or behaviour that would be seen as reinforcing these exact stereotypes.

Nowhere was this more notable than in Eastern European ways of dealing with recent memories and to some extent still ongoing experiences of Russian imperialism and colonialism, which they had to downplay, deny and diminish to be seen as West-like as possible. This self-denial, superficial as it was, has over time become accepted and internalised by many Eastern Europeans to the extent that it contributed to the sense of shock many of them felt when faced with Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Yet in the West, their politicians and diplomats had been criticised for supposed 'alarmism' and even 'Russophobia' even when such labels were clearly not merited, reflecting old Euro-Orientalist stereotypes about the Eastern European lack of moderation and hot-headedness. On one occasion, the president of Finland stated that the Baltic states, having been a part of the USSR, were simply undergoing 'a post-traumatic state of stress' (quoted in Banka 2023: 380).

Nevertheless, the surprise of Eastern Europeans themselves was minor compared to the cognitive challenge experienced by the Western societies. These were for the most part completely unprepared for Russia's all-out war, failed to act decisively enough on sanctions and especially on weapons deliveries, and have committed other strategic errors that certainly cost Ukrainian lives. At the same time, the failure to adequately judge Russia's intentions in good time has tested the resilience of the West itself, forcing it to adopt all manner of *ad hoc* measures to deal with the changed security situation. Likely, the costs would have been even greater, had there not appeared some belated willingness to take Eastern European voices seriously. In particular, the sentiment of 'we should

have listened to the Baltics' has been by now been repeated many times, and Baltic politicians themselves have also conceded that their views now get a greater hearing than before (see Banka 2023: 380–381).

In scholarship, the Western inclination to dismiss Eastern European warnings about Russia as motivated by something other than genuine security concerns has found its critical response in the already rich literature on 'Westsplaining' that has appeared over the last couple of years. Of course, it is a significantly broader notion than that, referring to the tendency of Western voices to assume the position of universal epistemic authority and to 'explain' events elsewhere in the world through misapplication of Western assumptions while ignoring local lived experience (see Kazharski 2022). But clearly, with this attitude one cannot but deliver wrong policy recommendations. Avoiding hubris and parochialism should be in everyone's interests.

At the time of writing, this painful period of Western learning and course-correction is still ongoing. The extent and seriousness of the Russian threat is still being misjudged in important ways. Orientalism towards Eastern Europe remains a stumbling block. But as liberal democracies, Western European states are capable of learning, and their Eastern European interlocutors now feel more empowered than ever to guide them. It is notable how this process has been easier for the extra-European Western powers, the UK, and the US, which see the continent as a more integrated whole and have therefore been able to act with less prejudice towards its Eastern periphery.

Finally, there is at long last a process afoot that has begun to invest Eastern Europeanness with positive connotations for Eastern Europeans themselves. It flows from solidarity with Ukraine, motivated by recognition of joint security interests and community of fate. Since the beginning of Russia's all-out invasion, Eastern European solidarity has developed into a force to be reckoned with. Whether by providing military assistance to Ukraine, welcoming Ukrainian refugees or supporting Ukraine in various international frameworks, other Eastern European states have tied their fates and interests to Ukraine like never before. For them, the period from the early 1990s onwards was about being reintegrated into the West, while accepting Western leadership. But in the 2020s, the Eastern European interests and perspectives, previously notable for underrepresentation in the international political discourse, are instead developing into more of a credible alternative to those of 'Old Europe'.

There is thus some potential that the long-standing Eastern European tendency to avoid being labelled as Eastern European, while at the same time ascribing Eastern-Europeanness to someone else, could give way to a more positive interpretation of the exact same label. Especially in conjunction with Western willingness to reassess their entrenched stereotypes about the region, a non-

-Orientalist appreciation of Eastern Europe could come into being both inside and outside of the region.

It remains to be seen what the ultimate implications of this 'positive Eastern--Europeanness' are going to be. But in this connection, it is good to keep in mind that our ideas about Europe – not just Eastern Europe – can change and develop over time, shaped by economic, political, military and cultural factors inside and outside of the region itself. One notable example of the concept's changeability was the shift of Europe's real (and later also symbolic) centre of power from the South to the North after the Reformation. Likewise, the power dynamics between the West and the East of Europe are likely to be changing in the future.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the relationship between Europe's West and Europe's East is – and has long been – an unequal one. Moreover, this inequality does not simply reflect a differing level of material resources between the two, but frequently also includes a sentiment of principled Western supremacy and denial of agency to the Eastern European 'other'. Instead of being accorded an independent existence, Eastern Europe tends to be cast in Western mental maps as a malleable buffer zone and a space of competition between European or global Great Powers. Consequently, Eastern European interests are defined only or primarily in reference to imperial interests, and Eastern European lived experiences are seen as no more than a form of peripheral discourse either serving or reacting against the imperial centres pulling it in opposite directions. The natural conclusion to be drawn from this view is that, ultimately, the political future of Eastern Europe must be decided over its own heads: through negotiations between the geopolitical power centres that actually matter.

This thinking is not limited to the exponents of Western gaze but has in various ways also affected Eastern Europeans themselves, who have been incentivised by their existential security needs to seek integration with the West. Consequently, they have had to downplay or deny their different experiences and outlooks from those prevalent in the West, while also trying to reject the Eastern European identity that they see as being imposed on them from the outside. Amongst other negative outcomes, this devaluation of Eastern European experiences has resulted in Russian imperialism and colonialism having been insufficiently understood in the West, with well-known consequences.

In the article, I have referred to various terms and concepts – Euro--Orientalism, mental maps, phantom borders, lateness to modernity, counter--orientalism, positive Eastern Europeanness – that can help to make sense of how to approach the subject of Western Orientalism against Eastern Europe in the context of scholarly, but also possibly political, inquiry. It is my hope that

this field will grow and the debate continue, with the eventual outcome of Eastern European agency being recognised and its regional identity invested with new and more positive content.

<div align="center">∾</div>

Mart Kuldkepp is Professor of Estonian and Nordic History at University College London (UCL). He defended his doctoral degree at University of Tartu, Estonia, in 2014. His research interests include the First World War in the Baltic Sea Region, Baltic-Nordic political and diplomatic contacts in the first half of the 20th century, and the political history of Estonia.

References
Adamovsky, E. (2005): Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern Europe in France, 1810–1880. *The Journal of Modern History*, 77(3), 591–628.

Armour, I. D. (2021): *A History of Eastern Europe 1918 to the Present: Modernisation, Ideology and Nationality*. London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic.

Bakić-Hayden, M. (1995): Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review*, 54(4), 917–931.

Ballinger, P. (2017): Whatever Happened to Eastern Europe?: Revisiting Europe's Eastern Peripheries. *East European Politics and Societies*, 31(1), 44–67.

Banka, A. (2023): The Baltic Predicament in the Shadow of Russia's War in Ukraine. *Orbis*, 67(3), 370–388.

Bialasiewicz, L. (2012): Spectres of Europe: Europe's Past, Present, and Future. In: Stone, D. (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*. Oxford University Press, 98–119.

Bielousova, G. (2022): *The Making of Savage Europe: Religious Difference and The Idea of Eastern Europe*. PhD dissertation. Duke University.

Bracewell, W. (2020): Eastern Europe, with and without borders. In: Bernhard, M. H., Bugajski, J. & Jackson, S. F. (eds.): *The Rebirth of Area Studies: Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the 21st Century*. London: I.B. Tauris, 91–128.

Brenner, R. (1989): Economic Backwardness in Eastern Europe in Light of Developments in the West. In: Chirot, D. (ed.): *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 15–53.

Brolsma, M., de Bruin, R. & Lok, M. (2019): Introduction. In: Brolsma, M., de Bruin, R. & Lok, M. (eds.): *Eurocentrism in European History and Memory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 11–21.

Bugge, P. (2022): The History of the Dichotomy of Civic Western and Ethnic Eastern Nationalism. *National Identities*, 24(5), 505–522.

Carlgren, W. M. (1993): *Sverige och Baltikum: från mellankrigstid till efterkrigsår. En översikt*. Stockholm: Publica.

Chirot, D. (1989): Causes and Consequences of Backwardness. In: Chirot, D. (ed.): *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1–15.

Confino, M. (1994): Re-Inventing the Enlightenment: Western Images of Eastern Realities in the Eighteenth Century. Reviewed work: Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment by L. Wolff. *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, 36(3/4), 505–522.

Dupcsik, C. (1999): Postcolonial Studies and the Inventing of Eastern Europe. *East Central Europe*, 26(1), 1–14.

Franzinetti, G. (2008): The Idea and the Reality of Eastern Europe in the Eighteenth-Century. *History of European Ideas*, 34(4), 361–368.

Fricker, M. (2007): *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gati, C. (1990): East-Central Europe: The Morning After. *Foreign Affairs*, 69(5), 129–145.

Hirschhausen, B. v., Grandits, H., Kraft, C., Müller, D. & Serrier, T. (2019): Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe. *Slavic Review*, 78(2), 368–389.

Hirschhausen, B. v. (2020): Phantomgrenzen als heuristisches Konzept für die Grenzforschung. In: Gerst, D., Krämer, H. & Klessmann, M. (eds.): *Handbuch Grenzforschung*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 174–189.

Jaskułowski, K. (2010): Western (civic) "versus" Eastern (ethnic) Nationalism. The Origins and Critique of the Dichotomy. *Polish Sociological Review*, 171, 289–303.

Kalmar, I. (2022): *White But Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*. Bristol University Press.

Kazharski, A. (2022): *Explaining the "Westsplainers": Can a Western scholar be an authority on Central and Eastern Europe?* Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies: Forum for Ukrainian Studies. <accessed online: https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2022/07/19/explaining-the-westsplainers-can-a-western-scholar-be-an-authority-on-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

Kołodziejczyk, D. & Huigen, S. (2023): East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial: A Critical Introduction. In: Huigen, S. & Kołodziejczyk, D. (eds.): *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–17.

Kolosov, V. (2020): Phantom Borders: The Role in Territorial Identity and the Impact on Society. Belgeo. *Revue belge de géographie*, 2, <accessed online http://journals.openedition.org/belgeo/38812>.

Kuldkepp, M. (2023): *Põhjamaine Eesti. Eesti rahvusriikluse sünd rahvusüleses vaates*. Tallinn: Varrak [forthcoming].

Laczó, F. (2023): Rethinking Eastern Europe in European Studies: Creating Symmetry Through Interdisciplinarity. In: Bijsterveld, K. & Swinnen, A. (eds.): *Interdisciplinarity in the Scholarly Life Cycle*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 79–98.

Liulevicius, V. G. (2000): *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge University Press.

Mäe, R. (2017): The Story of e-Estonia. A Discourse-Theoretical Approach. *Baltic Worlds*, 1–2, 32–44.

Mälksoo, M. (2013). Nesting Orientalisms at War: World War II and the 'Memory War' in Eastern Europe. In: Barkawi, T. & Stanski, K. (eds.): *Orientalism and War*. Oxford University Press, 176–195.

Melegh, A. (2006): *On the East-West Slope: Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Müller, M. G. (2009): Where and When Was (East) Central Europe? In: Arnason, J. P. & Doyle, N. J. (eds.): *Domains and Divisions of European History*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 112–125.

Paloff, B. (2014): East Is Always Further East. *East European Politics and Societies*, 28(4), 687–692.

Piirimäe, K. (2014): *Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Baltic Question: Allied Relations during the Second World War*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pohlhaus Jr., G. (2017): Varieties of Epistemic Injustice. In: Kidd, I. J., Medina, J., Pohlhaus Jr., G. (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice.* New York, NY: Routledge, 13–26.

Said, E. W. (1978): *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Schenk, F. B. (2017): Eastern Europe. In: Mishkova, D. & Trencsényi, B. (eds.): *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 188–209.

Todorova, M. N. (2009): *Imagining the Balkans*. Updated Edition. Oxford University Press.

Varga, M. (2022): Mental Maps of Eastern Europe: States, Mentalities, Modernisation. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(4), 372–388.

Wallerstein, I. (1974): *The Modern World-System, vol. 1: Capitalist Agriculture, and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.

Wolff, L. (1994): *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.

Wunsch, S. (2006): Suomi ei ole mikään Baltian maa. Suhtautuminen Baltian maihin suomalaisten sanomalehtien poliittisessa kirjoittelussa 1939‑1940. In: Alenius, K., Honkala, A. & Wunsch, S. (eds.): *Itämeren itälaidalla. Näkökulmia identiteetin ja yhteistyön historiaan*. Rovaniemi: Pohjois-Suomen Historial-linen Yhdistys, 45–60.