



Agnieszka Pawłowska¹

International conference “Images of Europe in Transition”, Kiev/Ukraine, 25th-26th november 2016 Conference report

The reported conference has been organized by the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (Brunswick, Germany) and the Association of Teachers of History and Civic Education “Nova Doba” (Ukraine). Throughout two days, teachers, academics and representatives of the civic organizations from Germany, Poland, Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) discussed the content of history textbooks with respect to images of Europe presented there. Seven national cases were presented. Subsequent intense debates, sometimes marked by emotions, proved the deep engagement of the participants in the discussions. “National” presentations were grouped into four panels, to a certain extent subordinated to geography, but definitely not to the commonality of experience. National panels were closed out by a separate presentation devoted to the image of Europe in the Russian textbooks. Panels were included in the framework of theoretical introduction and conclusions. The conference proceeded in German, Russian and English with simultaneous translation to all three languages.

After the welcome by prof. Polina Verbytska (History Department of the Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine) and dr. Robert Maier (Georg Eckert Institute), the introduction to the title issue was made by professors Frank Golczewski (University of Hamburg/Germany) and Bodo von Borries (University of Hamburg/Germany). In his presentation

¹ Associate Professor in the Institute of Political Science, University of Rzeszów, Poland, al. mjr. W. Kopisto 2a, 35-959 Rzeszów, e-mail: apawlowska@ur.edu.pl

Europe and the Countries of the Eastern Partnership: Thoughts on the Imaginative Space 'Europe', prof. Golczewski paid attention to the importance of current events for the image of Europe presented in public discourse as well as throughout history education. His special interest went to the internal crisis of European Union resulted from a massive influx of immigrants from the Middle East, Brexit, but particularly by increased influence of the anti-European nationalists who refer to “the worst anti-humanitarian traditions that Europe offers”. The military conflict between Russian Federation (RF) and Ukraine is also an important factor in shaping the image of Europe, as RF – being the successor to the Soviet Union – also inherited (partly due to its imperial politics) the image of being the antithesis of Europe (*the communist divide between Europe and the Soviet Union was re-interpreted as a divide between “Europe” and Russia*).

In his comprehensive speech, prof. von Borries (*Europe as a Topic for History Lessons – Wrong Tracks and Potentials*) referred to a range of issues, including: a) the numerous meanings of “Europe” – geographic, cultural, symbolic, but also normative, pointing at the dichotomy in presenting Europe as “the light-bringer for a mankind” but also as “rulers and destroyers of the world”; b) the question of the Eurocentric interpretation of the world history and Eurocentric attitude towards other cultures, as well as internal polarisation of Europe (North vs. South; West vs. East); c) the complex and tricky issue of defining Central and Eastern Europe – prof. Borries refers to the term “Zwischeneuropa” (Intermediate Europe) – and describing its history; d) a clash of religions and cultures and its impact on European history. Those issues mentioned, crucial for understanding the history of Europe and the world, became the starting point for the proposal of the history curriculum.

The following four panels were dedicated to national cases (Ukraine and Belarus; Moldova and Georgia; Armenia and Azerbaijan; The View of Europe from Russian Textbooks) of presenting Europe in history textbooks. The author of the present report will not refer separately to the particular papers, but rather discuss the focal and common issues that appeared throughout their presentations and subsequent discussion.

The importance of the current political events on the perception of Europe – marked by prof. F. Golczewski – was corroborated by Sergiy Rummyantsev (the South Caucasus Open School in Tiflis/Azerbaijan), who pointed at the changing pattern of political discourse – from pro- to anti-European – dictated by the ad hoc events, which does not, however,

go hand in hand with economic or cultural relations of Azerbaijan with EU member states. S. Rumyantsev further stated that this official anti-European discourse had a low effect on the narrative at school, as Europe and the West are on the periphery of the Azerbaijan's history as described in textbooks.

The changing image of Europe as a result of a historical transformation has been recognized by Alexander Shevyrev (Moscow State Lomonosov University, Moscow/Russia). The author began by discussing the Soviet historical narrative marked by Marxist ideology, in which Europe was seen as a place of universal oppression of the working class. This narrative changed in the 1990s – Europe has become a model of economic and social life worthy of imitation. It would seem that the alteration of power in the RF at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries and the more state-centric stance of the new president of Russian Federation affect the image of Europe in the textbooks, still it didn't happen on the larger scale. Anti-European sentiments, escalating since 2014 are not reflected in the latest history textbook published in 2016, where “Europe is still portrayed as a dynamic region and the European Union – an effective way of solving economic and social problems”.

The dichotomy between Europe and the Soviet Union (presently Russian Federation), already mentioned by prof. F. Golczewski was a frequent topic of other presentations. Speakers referred to the origins of the cultural cleavage between the East and the West. In the majority of presented national cases the fundamental role of the division of the Christianity into Roman and Byzantine churches were raised. Political culture formed as a result of the tradition of autocracy, supported by the subordination of the Orthodox Church to the secular power, was reflected and enhanced in the Soviet totalitarian regime.

Interestingly, in the majority of national cases, history textbooks present the given country as somewhere between the East and the West, exposed to the mutual influence of the two (in selected cases – three) cultural systems – because of its geographical location (Belarus, but also Azerbaijan), and/or because of intermingled influences of religious systems and related social orders. This has been vividly presented by dr. Mikayel Zolyan (Institute of Sociology, Philosophy and Law, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan/Armenia), who observed, that “Armenia is situated in the zone of mutual influence of three civilizations: European, Oriental and Slavic: apparently ‘Slavic’ being a euphemism for Russian, which is considered to be a separate ‘civilization’”.

The issue of the positioning its own nation/state with respect to generalized Europe, and at the same time constructing its own identity, appeared the most complex problem which was under discussion throughout the two days of the conference. In the discussed cases (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia Azerbaijan) the history of nation does not entirely coincide with the history of the nation state. In all analysed cases, the history of the particular nation was the dependent variable of the history of its ancestor – in the case of Moldova, it was Romania and later USSR; in cases of Ukraine and Belarus, it was Poland and later USSR; in cases of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, it was Russian and then the Soviet empire (not going into earlier periods).

Gaining independence by the discussed nations is inextricably associated with the rejection of the Soviet past – it is the first step to define those nations themselves by negation of what they do not identify with. This statement does not refer to the Russians who cannot simply reject this past, as legally the Russian Federation announced itself to be the successor of the Soviet Union. And partly this is why narratives constructed around the relations to the RF are a dependent variable of the narratives of Soviet past. But the USSR, and now the RF, is also the point of reference for constructing the image of Europe. Andrei Antonov (Ion Creangă Pedagogical State University, Chişinău/Moldova) has remarked that in Moldovan history textbooks “Europe is described all times parallel with Soviet Union or against Soviet background images, sometimes on the Russian Federation background”.

The Moldovan example appears somewhere between a negative and neutral attitude towards the RF. On the other hand, the description and interpretation of the contents of Byelorussian textbooks show “European aspirations” of the nation but not confronting it with any image of the RF, although the Soviet past is being analysed. Numerous citations from the textbooks quoted by Denis Larionov (Belorussian State University, Minsk/Belarus) show the determination of their authors to convince the readers of the Europeanness of Belarus, although the style of exercising power by the current President is far from European standards.

Oddly enough, a very modest attitude towards RF has been presented by Sergii Konyukhov (Lviv Polytechnic National University, Lviv/Ukraine), who, writing about the contents of Ukrainian textbooks in the early 1990s, referred to the tsarist Russia, and later to the Soviet Union, trying to balance advantages and disadvantages of Ukraine being

within the limits of the USSR. Relations of independent Ukraine and the RF have not been referred to.

While the attitude to generalized Russia in Byelorussian and Ukrainian textbooks could be assessed as neutral, in Georgia we are dealing with a negative picture, starting from the Russian empire which conquered Georgia in the early 19th c. Since then – as Nodar Shoshiashvili (St. Andrew the First-Called Georgian University, Georgia) quoted from one of the history textbooks – “the main feature of this 117-year history of the Georgian people is its struggle against colonial oppression on the part of Russia”. The predecessor of the RF has been presented in Georgian textbooks as “the main evil, the cause of all erroneous developments and grievances”. According to their authors, even after the collapse of USSR, the domination of Russia prolonged since “Georgia was forced to join the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States – exp. AP], which was established at the initiative of Moscow”. Finally, the Russian-Georgian war is explained as “Russia's revenge on Georgia for its striving to become part of the West.”

Simplifying the problem, the RF as the successor of the Soviet past and “the slave” of its imperial anchorage is “the antithesis” to Europe – “the land of plenty” in quantifiable and symbolic meaning. It is worth, however, mentioning, that Europe can be the “antithesis” itself. Martin Alm noticed it in reference to the image of the Old Continent shared by the Americans: “In the American historical imagination, Europe might conceivably function either as something to be identified with, as part of a Western Euro-American civilisation or as an Other with which to contrast America. The literature mostly indicates the latter”².

In some respects, the image of Europe is shared by the Americans and several nations discussed here. Americans characterize Europeans as unreliable³, a feeling of abandonment and disappointment is also observable in some analysed history textbooks. D. Larionov, quoting one of the Belarussian textbooks, pointed at the absence of diplomatic and military assistance from Europe, when the Belarussian People's Republic was being established. Failed expectations towards Europe are also expressed by the authors of Armenian textbooks, particularly in respect of the Armenian Genocide: “The Allies actually cheated the Armenian people... their pro-Armenian position was insincere... the hopes of the Armenian

² M. Alm, 2014, *Europe in American World History textbooks*, “Journal of Transatlantic Studies”, 3, p. 239, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14794012.2014.928024>.

³ Supra note, p. 237.

people were futile and groundless particularly the hopes that the West would help”. Some resentment is also visible in Georgian textbooks.

It seems that the authors of the history textbooks face not an easy task of “reconciling” two images of Europe – the one having particular interests, sometimes selfish and entangled in the politics of world powers; and the other – cultivating values of freedom, democracy, human rights, prosperity, etc. That task, however, has been with considerable success undertaken by the group of Ukrainian teachers, who presented, in one of the panels, their project and report on aspects of didactics and methodology, pupil attitudes and difficulties experienced when teaching the topic of ‘Europe’.

Participants of the concluding panel – among others, the author of the present report – faced a hard task to summarize the proceeding of the conference pointing at the common denominator of the presented cases of “national” images of Europe presented in history textbooks. Europe is usually presented as the antithesis of the totalitarian regime; as an effective economy and fair political system, where freedom and social justice stand high in the hierarchy of values. Another common denominator in the debate on the image of Europe is – paradoxically – constructing own national identity and how it is related to what can be labelled “Europeanism”.

The reported conference was a thought-provoking experience for both the participants presenting the national cases, and those commenting the title topic from the point of view of societies existing within the EU, frequently being identified with the whole of Europe and the West. The proceedings of the conference are to be published in electronic format, both in English and in Russian, making presented studies accessible for the broader public.