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## GEOPOLITICS AND TOURISM IN POLAND

### Where is it?

It is difficult to give a simple answer to a question: “Where is Poland located?” The area on which our country is situated has various names – the Central Europe, Central-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, New Europe, New European Union Countries and Post-communist Europe. They contain meanings coming from the depth of old times, the events of the twentieth-century history or the latest political and economic transformations on the European continent.

Confronted with the question “Where is it?” we instinctively think: neither in the West nor the East of Europe, in the middle, “in between”. It is one of the Baltic countries situated in the central part of the southern coast. If we assume that Poland is located in the Central Europe, then the geophysical arguments will be in the foreground, but are they completely devoid of historical references? The Central Europe with Poland within it is not so much regarded as “the middle” in the sense of being in the centre, but rather this part of Europe is perceived as being “in between”. On one side, Poland borders on the West, having a particular set of cultural, economic and moral connotations, and on

the other side, with the East, located by history researchers at the opposite end of the axis of these meanings.

Poland is a very interesting case of a European country which for over 100 years disappeared from the map of Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century Poles struggled with the limitations imposed by foreign powers – Prussia, Austria and Russia (The Partition of Poland). Such a long period of enslavement contributed to the strong political, cultural and economic differentiation of subordinate territories. Already in the liberated country, between the First and Second World War, an intensive process of uniting the divided country began. The nation undertook the challenge of becoming independent and of rebuilding the state in all areas of its functioning. Tourism also developed dynamically. Zakopane situated near the Tatra mountains called “the Polish Alps” became the winter capital of Poland. Krynica Zdrój with unique mountain climate and cultural landscape, hosted the elites from all over Europe. A luxury train “Luxtorpeda” was launched, transporting visitors to well-known spa and ski centres in the south of Poland.

Already during the Second World War a new division of Europe began to take shape which had serious consequences also in the sphere of travel freedom. In Yalta the three leaders: Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin placed Poland in the eastern zone of influence. After the war the division into Western and Eastern Europe was finally confirmed. The arms race started, and the “Iron Curtain” fell on the border dividing the two parts of Europe. The new borders of the country established in Yalta forced resettlement of millions of people – Germans to the west, and Poles from the lands lost by Poland in the east to the areas abandoned by the Germans. The country was “moved” from the east to the west.

The border going through the post-war Europe divided the world into black and white, good and evil, free and en-

slaved. Politics defined the spaces in which Europeans lived. The demarcation line crossing the continent was difficult to break through. A lot of effort was put into observing and capturing the enemy. The two sides of Europe turned away from each other, making it easier to preserve the sets of meanings associated with the east and west [Schlögel 2005, pp. 214–215]. The fully planned economy, authoritarianism, lack of freedom of movement and many other restrictions became the main reference points describing the east of Europe. The contact between representatives of both sides became a celebrated event, a significant carefully remembered meeting of travellers from different worlds.

### Political changes and tourism development

Such a symbolic breakthrough giving hope for meeting of the worlds, a breath in the sphere of European culture was the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students held in Warsaw in 1955. Thousands of young visitors from around the world came there which gave Polish citizens an opportunity to meet people from countries that were unavailable for them. Until this day there have been rumours around Warsaw about how the students wishing to enter the free world were hidden in trains by the departing participants of the Festival. They hid in the toilets, on the luggage shelves, and even in suitcases. These were the first individual trips, completely beyond the control of the authorities. Tourism developed intensively under the “socialist camp”. With time, there have been numerous facilities, and the trips were quite cheap. Many of them took an organized form, as group tours, youth exchange, training and political courses.

The 1960s witnessed a crystallization of the system of spending holidays in resort hotels owned by the large industrial enterprises or public state institutions. Also a comfort-

able accommodation base was created which was designed for foreigners leaving hard currency in Poland.

At the same time tourism to socialist countries started to develop and was strictly controlled by the state. Employees travelled to holiday houses in Bulgaria, Hungary, the Soviet Union and the eastern part of Germany. Under the guise of political organizations, youth exchange was organized within the Eastern Bloc. It was at the same time trade tourism as with the absence of everything in the country, we tried to carry away what we could and sell it on the beach, at the hotel, at the station. In the neighbouring countries you could buy other limited goods, and thus what followed was spontaneous, interpersonal foreign trade.

Already then, although tourist trips were strictly rationed goods, tourism played a great social role, of confrontation and gaining knowledge about the divided worlds. My generation was hungry for learning about cultural spaces outside our country. The possibility to move to other areas, especially the western countries, was strictly rationed, it marked the social status and gave social ennoblement. Travelling or a tourist trip had their autonomous sense.

Under government control limited number of scholars, artists, political elite had possibilities to visit 'capitalists countries'. They created the discourse about travelling that period. In the mass media we could listen to storytellers relating "what it is like there." Travelling was a kind of distinction, undergoing experiences which later would be widely reported. Someone who made a journey earned recognition in their environment. Voyages abroad also aroused jealousy, just as many goods that were difficult to obtain at that time.

The best example of description of the "distinction by journey" is a theatre play "Laokoon Group" by an outstanding Polish playwright and poet Stanisław Różewicz. An acclaimed art historian feels honoured by the opportunity to go to Greece and contemplate the very sculpture "Laokoon

Group” [Różewicz 1961]. After his return, it becomes the main theme of travel description. Even those to whom this message does not mean anything, treat the interlocutor with admiration and adoration, showing that they fully share his experience gained from the trip.

It was not until the era of the rule of the First Secretary Edward Gierek that trips to western countries and other areas of the world democratized, it became more accessible to average people. It was enough to have \$ 100 on your account to be able to travel outside the Socialist Bloc. We all transferred each other the same amount of money to get a certificate from the bank and submit it in the passport office. I found myself for the first time in the West in the UK to learn the language in its homeland during the holidays. Working in a London hotel, I spent my free time in Hyde Park. On a parcel of land which lies roughly between the site of the old Tyburn gallows and the Reformers’ Tree in London’s Hyde Park I looked at how people publicly express their views. It was something surprising for a person from the Eastern Europe.

At that time, a tourist arriving from Western World to Poland was treated as a rich man throwing his dollars about. In terms of purchasing various goods and services, and especially the rental of hotel rooms, there were two kinds of prices– lower for domestic tourists and much higher for visitors from abroad. Working as a waiter, cloakroom attendant or a porter was the pinnacle of success in employment in tourism services. Near hotels and at railway stations you could often meet money changers named “cinkciarz”. Due to the exchange rate, small donations in hard currency became the beginnings of large fortunes, a possibility to settle down. Over time, the number of tourists increased, visits of scientists, scholars, representatives of culture and business proceeded. A specific relationship to the foreigner started to emerge, burdened with a variety of complexes summed

up in the phrase – “What will they think about us?” We were bending over backwards, we did our best to “come off best,” in the meantime leaving aside many important issues. Some part of it stayed in us and indiscriminate imitation of everything revealed “abroad” has many enthusiasts [see: Keck-Szajbel 2011, pp. 131–146].

Martial law introduced in 1981 limited all kind of travels, crossing the Polish border and mutual visits became difficult. In Poland, a new type of tourist from the West appeared. In this period visitors were mostly concentrated on social and political aid to Polish citizens. The need for support and to provide assistance united, although in an unofficial discourse, both worlds again. You could say that we experienced responsible tourism.

Our friends from the West, students and pensioners especially the latter ones having time and some savings, moved for some period to Poland to activate voluntary service. They taught languages and organized material aid including also the one that enabled the opposition to undertake its activity.

Revolution of Solidarity and political transformations in 1989 as well as the fall of the Berlin Wall, generated a fundamental change in terms of political and economic activity and the freedom of movement. The important political change for the development of tourism in Poland was Polish accession to the European Union in 2004 and the inclusion of the country to the Schengen Agreement in 2007, abolishing control of persons crossing borders within the EU countries. In this period a wave of young people looking for work started from Poland toward Western Europe. They showed their distinctiveness, otherness in diversity, willingness to work and education. It is from them that the inhabitants of different Western European countries learnt how to spend a weekend or holidays in Poland where to go and how much it would cost.

Tourism after 1989 plays a special role. Mutually visiting tourists confirm or rectify their ideas about their neighbours

from the East and West. Tourist space in Europe enlarged, enabling people to visit new areas of cultural landscapes, customs and taste the local kitchen. Poland started to be visited not only by classical leisure and heritage tourists but also by on one-day shoppers and migrants in search of work from Eastern European countries: Ukraine, Belarus and other countries of the Central Europe. They play a similar role as Polish workers in the West - show their skills in practice, study at Polish universities and promote culture of their native countries. Newcomers are a great promoters of tourist values in Poland – they transfer and popularize films, photos and guide-books invite families and friends, causing that, inbound tourism from the East is developing promisingly. Travel facilities, growing tourist industry and changes taking place in Polish society contribute to the growth of arrivals from many other directions of the world. The descendants of migrants of the Jewish Diaspora, of old and new migration of Poles on all continents, are finding reasons to visit the country of their ancestors. What is taking place is a closer getting to know each other and reading the mutual relations anew.

The young generations of tourists write a new chapter in relations with the inhabitants of the country once abandoned by their ancestors. Erica T. Lehrer writes in her book – *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places (New Anthropologies of Europe)* – that with the end of the communist era, Jews from every corner of the world set off to Poland to visit places associated with the Holocaust. After several such ventures members of the Jewish Diaspora wished for something more – to know their roots and to have a closer contact with the inhabitants of Poland. In Erica Lehrer's opinion, the number of Poles fascinated with the history and contemporary life of Jews is constantly growing. She researches the intersection of Polish and Jewish memory projects that are born from knowing the essence of the historic neighbourhood of Kazimierz in Kraków. The

author's personal journey becomes a part of the story in which she reveals how Jews and Poles form the space together, find common history, develop friendships, and their multicultural representations give meaning to the historical heritage [Lehre 2013].

The free market responded quickly to the new needs of tourism. Three regions of the country most attractive to tourism – the Baltic region, mountain region and Mazury Lakes region – invested most quickly in accommodation base and recreational facilities. Terms such as tourist development, revitalization, ecotourism entered the planning documents of regional and local governments. The use of cultural heritage, natural resources, creating new tourism products in the form of regular events, festivals showing local characteristics found a permanent place in the tourist offer.

Now, with the support of European funds, a great promotion of regions of eastern and southern Poland was launched. Podlasie, Lublin and Podkarpacie regions are ready to receive masses of tourists, but first one needs systematic information on why it is worth to go there. Multiculturalism there creates cultural landscapes, sacred and secular, that will not be found anywhere else. Thus we, the inhabitants of our country, have our East filled with beautiful culture of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the charm of dialects, customs, and also unique nature. Not without a reason, the eastern regions of the country were called 'green lungs of Poland' [Bera 2013, pp. 5–24].

Malopolska Province, in the south of the country, is identified with Kraków, the former capital city of Poland, the Jagiellonian University one of the oldest in the world and with the Tatra mountains. The residents of the area are masters of self-promotion and may an anecdote of mountain inhabitants serve as an example. The Highlanders have their own version of the creation of mountains called the Tatras. When God already created the Alps and gave them a per-



fect form, he decided to put the rest of the Alps in Northern Carpathians so that the shepherds had a place where they could graze their sheep.

### Still, where is it?

The discussion about the need to develop a concept of Central Europe after 1989 revived, although agreeing on a single plane of references outside the community of political fates of the last several dozen years is not easy, with all the historical and cultural complexities of this part of Europe. Countries in the region, wanting to clearly determine their place in the united Europe and, at the same time, to create a significant middle force among the adjacent powers, again want to give a meaning to a common cultural and political space in the changed historical realities.<sup>1</sup> There are also civilization and historical reasons dating back to the cooperation of nations in Central Europe during the reign of the kings from the Jagiellonian dynasty. Many historians acknowledge that the policy of this dynasty from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, aimed at the integration of the peoples and nations of Central Europe by building up military and economic strength and extensive diplomatic activities.

In the terminology and descriptions of the new reality, however, the term of Eastern Europe dominates, one can sense here the subtext of civilization and economic backwardness. The term carries a historical burden, presumably emphasizes the specificity of some members of the European Union once belonging to the Eastern Bloc. Experts of the problem who come from this part of Europe are trying to find out what is the secret of the invariability of this term

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<sup>1</sup> Simona Skarbec is sceptical about the need to create such a project. She is afraid of ideologisation of the space defined as Central Europe. Compare: S. Skarbec (2005).

in naming the countries east of the Oder up to Dubrovnik in the south. The documents and papers issued under the aegis of the European Union use the terms: Europe of 27 countries, Europe of 15, countries that joined after 1989, the New Europe. I have not come across the Eastern Europe term there. However, in the texts developed in many other centres, especially in the field of political studies, the term is still alive.

Also quite bold mental constructions appear, such as relating to the close connections of cultural heritage of Southern Europe with the Polish culture and on this basis formulating the question “Does Poland Lie on the Mediterranean?” The authors of volume with such a title are convinced that the reception of Mediterranean culture offers new perspectives of describing the cultural heritage of the Central and Eastern Europe. As explained by the authors of the work the absorption of antiquity in these areas took place not only through intellectual processing and borrowings but also through direct meetings with the residents of southern Europe. After all we had a common cultural borderland before nation states formed [Kusek, Sanetra-Szeliga (eds.) 2012].

Therefore a cultural, economic and partly political community? There will be no East and West anymore? There will because Eastern-Europeanism in all its manifestations is in ourselves, the inhabitants of this part of the continent. The works that are the boldest in undertaking issues of regionalisms of Europe were written by the authors with roots in its eastern part. Leon Marc, a diplomat and writer, Slovenian Ambassador to the Netherlands in a collection of essays on literature strongly supported by historical facts finding in *What's so Eastern about Eastern Europe*, refers to the stereotypes about the region and their origins. He explains to the reader in a communicative way, with erudition and passion, how Slovenes, Croats, Poles and other

inhabitants of Central Europe see themselves. According to the principle of 'I can criticise myself but let others be careful about it', he boldly points out and stigmatizes the weaknesses of societies of countries freed from communism. The essence of Eastern-Europeanism, he writes, are contradictory, mutually conflicting relations towards the heritage – 'The majority of them are certainly proud of their past and their traditions. However, they do not wish to live in an ethnographic museum in which they themselves are the objects of undue attention. They do not wish others to see their respect for tradition as a sign of backwardness – if, indeed, this respect is any stronger in Eastern European countries than it is in countries like Italy, Switzerland, Germany or other places where old folk customs are on the tourist menu. They do not wish to be seen as a living laboratory of the European past, where those from the West can observe how they used to look to themselves ages ago' [Marc 2009, p. 76].

Direct contacts with tourists and sociological studies presenting their reference to the visited communities do not show thinking based on negative evaluations of cultures and their creators, of residents in areas east of Oder river. Tourists visiting Poland manifest curiosity about traditions, customs and history but also the daily life of its inhabitants. One could say that Eastern-Europeanism is a problem of ourselves, residents of the Eastern Europe who need to re-define ourselves in a common Europe. Europeans outside this sphere are not very sensitive to these issues. Simona Škrabec, of Slovene descent, who received a doctorate in literary theory at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, in her work *Geography imagined. The concept of Central Europe in the twentieth century*, puts the sense of her arguments this way – 'Central Europe enables you to expand the perspective and go beyond national borders. In this sense, the past can be considered from a broader perspective,

you must dare to look beyond homely, familiar world. This brings us to the challenge which is the concept of Europe, still relevant and at the same time intangible. And the very limitation of questions only to the central part of the continent shows that we are still very far from the possibility to define what Europe is in general, and to accept its diversity'. Thus, there is a need to define the "centre", to determine its framework, diversity, cultural distinction of its components. Such a way of thinking leads to a better understanding and accustoming to the wider whole – Europe as such. Between a country and Europe as a whole there should be identified and defined indirect areas, categories introducing cognitive order, but also supporting the process of strengthening cultural identity. It is worth quoting another researcher of the concept of Eastern-Europeanism– Karl Schlögel. In the already cited work *Die Mitteliieghtostwarts. Europa im Ubergang* the author extremely vividly shows the formation of a new order in Europe. The emblems of the closed world, which was the Eastern Bloc, now exist only as a legacy – as debris. The author suggests that the dismantling of the old system and installation of new ones does not take place overnight and brings serious consequences for people's lives. In the economic sphere – the author claims – East-Central Europe seems to be on the loser position in relation to the West. The East is a vast intersphere in which there are 'swarms of bankrupts, crises, the unemployed'. However, more important than all this is the need to find one's way in the dismantled world. 'Now you must find your way in different countries, in various social worlds, having to deal with different languages and cultures. There still exists the East other than the Eastern Bloc, there is also a Europe that does not coincide with the Europeans' dream image of themselves. Behind the <system>, which we believe we had known, there is a new land, waiting to be discovered' [Schlögel 2005, p. 219].

## Is there any resolution?

Let us return to the question posed at the beginning – are we therefore – the East, the centre of Europe? Or maybe the West?

Open borders, dense network of road, rail and low-cost airlines communication as well as – superimposing on it – modern mass tourism, one of the most important branches of national economies, dealing annually with transportation of hundreds of millions of people in the global scale, has also left its stamp on European tourism, its directions and land development. Tourists hurry to the destinations promoted in the media and catalogues, the places they have chosen themselves.

Three events that I picked out during trips and meetings with tourists should not be taken literally but rather as metaphors of different time sequences of contemporary history.

At one of the get-togethers during my stay in Britain in the 1970s, one of the students asked for an explanation – if Poland is in the east, do you have access to the sea, then? The conversations stopped and everyone was expecting my response. The next sequence is the end of the 1980s. Participants of a trip from Poland to the south of France within the program of youth exchange inquire the guide 'How far is it from Monaco to Marseille? Can we get there on foot? We heard that it was somewhere near'. The third sequence is a negation of the previous ones. It is 2014 – a group of foreign tourists in the Old Town in Warsaw considering loudly: 'We still have 5 days. If two days are enough to sightsee Kraków, there is a chance for the jazz festival in Stare Sioło near Wetlina in the Bieszczady. And where are we going to stay in Cisna or in Ustrzyki Górne?'

The Internet and other media of obtaining information and communication, open borders, more and more efficient transport invalidated the first two cited examples forever. Tourists of the twenty-first century are precise, they know how they want to sightsee and hang out, then they determine where and why they want to be. It depends on contemporary young and future generations whether Europe will mean something more than an area circled in the map, whether – through mutual familiarisation – the process of accustoming to new space and cultural close-ups will deepen.

There is no clear answer to the question ‘where is Poland’ and geopolitical factors have a lot to do with it. Considerations on this subject are ongoing, and as it is clear from the presented points of view, Poland is placed in a differently called place of its location in this part of Europe – the Western, Eastern, Central, New. Maybe notions change their vectors and, in such a case, we will start everything from the beginning? The new European Community comprising 25 state organisms must take great organizational challenge in the area of tourism, which in turn may have a significant impact on future structural and geographical patterns of development. However, apart from the commercial element, it will significantly influence the mutual perception of history and contemporary achievements of the inhabitants of East and West.

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## Problems to discuss:

1. How may geopolitical conditions influence tourism?
2. How is tourism in Poland determined by political changes in Europe?
3. What chances and limitations for tourism development result from geopolitical location of Poland?
4. How do geopolitical conditions influence tourism in your country?