CHAPTER ONE

THE MAKING OF A BORDERLAND

1. European neighborhoods and Eurasian borderlands
   Belarus and the Baltic States

Belarus occupies a somewhat ambiguous position vis-a-vis Europe. While geographically a European country, it failed to develop political and cultural institutions associated with modern Europe. In order to understand Belarus’s peculiar borderland position between Europe and Eurasia, we must look at it those of its neighbors which found their place in the unfolding European project whose political borders have recently been expanded to the east. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which shared Belarus’s experience as constituent Soviet republics, and have recently been admitted to the European Union, provide an informative background to Belarus’s geopolitical situation.

The borders of Europe, fixed in geographical taxonomy circa 430 B.C., when Herodotus drew them along the Ural and Caucasus mountains, never coincided with territorial limits of political structures and social institutions that came to be thought of as European. It was always implied that when one spoke of Europe as an identifiable entity, it was defined by political and cultural, rather than strictly geographical, borders. Of course, political and cultural borders usually did not coincide, so that cultural “neighborhoods” transcended political boundaries. Most nations and ethnic groups on the eastern periphery of Europe, those that in the last two or three hundred years were under the political domination of Russia (first, as the Russian Empire, then as the Soviet Union), tended to think of themselves as members of a particular European “neighborhood”.1 Estonia emphasized its linguistic affinity with Finland and association with Sweden and Denmark going back seven centuries. Latvia remembered its German connections via the Teutonic Order and Hanseatic League. Lithuania, despite centuries-long association with Poland, chose to think of the Baltic, i.e.

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1 I am indebted to Professor Roman Szporluk, of Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, for the concept of “cultural neighborhoods” used in a geopolitical context.
Germano-Scandinavian, “neighborhood” as its entryway to Europe. Many educated Ukrainians see the portion of their country that has been a province of the multi-ethnic Austrian empire for more than a century as the link that ties Ukraine to the destinies, history, and intellectual environment of Mitteleuropa.

In this long chain of states, large and small, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Belarus stands apart. It never had a strong current of public opinion or an influential group of intellectuals, which would envision the Belarusian nation-state within a particular European “neighborhood”. Even those Belarusians who hope to see their country accepted in the European community of nations belonging to Europe does not mean a close affiliation with one or more European countries, but rather an acceptance to supra-national structures, such as the EU or NATO. This attitude seems to be in line with the recent trend in the internal development of the European Union: away from the nation-state and toward supra-national bodies as the mainstay of today’s European political order. We shall soon see, however, it is the ability to preserve institutions of nation-state that make a country acceptable as a candidate for the membership in the united Europe. For the countries currently aspiring to membership in the European community, national statehood and its attendant national sentiment are regarded as necessary prerequisites for acceptance into the new, increasingly post-national and post-modern, Europe. To surrender, partly or wholly, national statehood to the EU, one must first possess it. Only nation-states, not regions or non-territorial entities, however defined, are considered for future membership, and by implication recognized as European by the collective conscience of Europe. There is yet another aspect of the old-fashioned nationalism, which helps it to remain relevant in today’s post-national Europe. It is sometimes easy to forget the crucial role nationalism played in the dissolution of the Soviet empire, an event that created geopolitical conditions, which ultimately allowed the European Union to expand its borders to the east.

Anti-Communist political movements ascending to power in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while charting their respective paths to independence, were not inspired by visions of post-modernity devoid of the national idea. In fact, emerging from the supra-national

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2 A compelling first-hand account of intellectual roots of Central and East European national movements in the late stages of Communist rule can be found in the series