

Justyna Straczuk

*Bielsk Podlaski: EU peripheries in the Centre of Europe – on the different efficacies of geopolitical and symbolic boundaries*

This article tackles the following questions: how has the eastern EU boundary affected the functioning of the local community of Bielsk Podlaski, particularly the consciousness and practices of the local elite who are involved in culture and cultural animation; has the eastern EU boundary a chance to fit in with existing divisions and images of Europe; have the processes of integration given new meaning to the old Polish political boundary and stimulated the construction of new social contents and meanings.

Although multicultural slogans have become an important and frequently used element of EU rhetoric among local elites and are now one of the region's signatures, it would be hard to find any major changes in consciousness and practice or their effects on existing activities in the field of cultural animation. Access to EU funds rather than substantive or practical inspiration seems to be the leading motive.

The European Union and its new boundaries are felt to be arbitrarily superimposed, unnecessary and restrictive. Once sealed, the eastern border cut off the inhabitants of Bielsk from its surroundings and from an important part of the world, another part of Europe, and is therefore anti-European because, instead of integrating Europe, it cuts it in half and divides East from West. From the point of view of the inhabitants of Bielsk who are proud that their region is a meeting place for two great civilizations, Latin and Bizantine, their locality is in the centre of this meeting place, not at its periphery.

The EU which cuts itself off from the East and imposes intransigent boundaries, Orientalizes and excludes its close neighbours, people just "like us", is viewed as an unfriendly and intrusive institution because it does not fit into the social image of Europe or the borderland's day-to-day practices. The idea of Europe as our interviewees define it is inconsistent with the concept of European Union which they see as a political institution which divides Europeans into "better" ones (those who are within the European structures) and "worse" ones (those who have been excluded from these structures). According to the local elite, the geopolitical EU boundary is not fulfilling its basic function, i.e., opposition to the different Other vis-à-vis whom one's own identity is constructed. Therefore it looks as if it will be a long time before the new EU boundary becomes symbolically effective and will no longer be denied by the local community.