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Toward a Critical Hermeneutics of "In-betweenness": Re-reading Abdziralovich, Miłosz, and Kundera in the Times of the New Imperial War in Europe

Abstract:

The article undertakes a critical examination of the relevance of interpreting Belarusian identity through the conceptual framework of being "in-between" East and West. In the aftermath of the 2020 protests in Belarus and the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the author reevaluates Ignat Abdziralovich's early twentieth century theory of "in-betweenness" as a form of decolonial thought. The analysis draws parallels between the ideas of Abdziralovich and those of Czesław Miłosz and Milan Kundera, with the objective of elucidating the correlation between the contentious ideological concept of Eastern Europe and the issue of Belarus' positioning within the European context. The argument is made that the historical and theoretical limits of conceptualizing Belarusian identity in terms of in-betweenness can be demonstrated through the lens of distinguishing between geocultural and geopolitical dimensions and the changing relationship between them.

Keywords:

Belarus, Eastern Europe, in-between positionality, borderland, identity, decolonization

The aim of this article is to problematize the relevance of the interpretation of Belarus – Belarusian identity – in terms of the positionality in-between East and West. In the Belarusian intellectual tradition, the first systematic elaboration of such an interpretation was proposed by Ignat Abdziralovich (Kancheuski) (1896–1923), in his philosophical essay *Адвечным шляхам. Дасьледзіны беларускага сьветагляду* (*Eternal Way. Study of the Belarusian Worldview*), which was first published in Vilnius in 1921. The work was written in the Belarusian language, and following its publication, it was "arrested" in the special archives throughout the Soviet period. The second edition of the essay only appeared in 1989 as *samizdat* (self-published). Since then, this seminal work has acquired a significant role in the development of national self-consciousness in Belarus. The essay was repeatedly reprinted by different publishing houses and was actively discussed among Belarusian intellectuals.

We have to rethink Abdziralovich's concept considering the cultural and socio-political challenges Belarusians face after the violent suppression of the 2020 protests and the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. These two catastrophes, including the Lukashenko regime's complicity in Putin's war and the escalating threat of Belarus' complete political and cultural subjugation to Russia, have culminated in a pervasive perception of Russian policy as imperial and colonial. Consequently, a significant number of Belarusian intellectuals, similar to their Ukrainian colleagues, initiated the development and promotion of a decolonization discourse.

The examination of the concept of decolonization resulted in the identification of a particular "double colonial loop": "Russian imperial claims to control our countries have long been reinforced by the dominance of Russia as a thematic focus in Western centers of post-Soviet and East European studies, and the dominance of the Russia-centered approach to our countries in Western academic and expert environments."[1] For Western societies, the misperception of Belarus and the deficit of relevant knowledge about our country were a natural consequence of the political history of Europe after World War II. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, the perception of Belarus, along with that of other post-Soviet nations, was influenced by the notion of catching-up modernization. This concept entailed the relegation of the country to a subordinate position in relation to Western Europe,

1) Shchyttsova and Korablyova, "Decolonizing Knowledge Production in Belarus and Ukraine," 7.

serving as a paradigmatic model of social and political life. Intellectually, this entailed the cultivation of an attitude of a "return to Europe," which implicitly consolidated a novel, soft form of quasi-colonial inferiority, this time in relation to Western Europe. Tlostanova, in a discussion that encompassed both post-Soviet countries and, more broadly, post-socialist nations, characterized this phenomenon in starkly radical terms: "Eastern Europeans after 1989 became the off-white blacks of the new global world – looking and behaving too similar to the same, yet remaining essentially other."[2]

The "double colonial loop" necessitates two kinds of efforts. Firstly, it requires efforts to compensate for the lack of knowledge about Belarus in the world. Secondly, it necessitates engagement in the genealogy of the very mental pattern of "in-betweenness." In this regard, it is crucial to acknowledge that historically, Eastern Europe has been perceived as an underdeveloped in-between subject within the geocultural imagination of Western Europeans. As Ferenc Laczó has noted, this perception of Eastern Europe can be traced back to the Enlightenment period, when "the notion of 'Eastern Europe' was 'invented' by Western thinkers … as a space in-between the 'civilized' and the 'barbaric'."[3] The aspiration to shed the lingering shadow of geocultural inferiority that has persisted throughout history gave rise to a novel conception of Central Europe in the 1980s.[4] In the aftermath of the dissolution of the socialist bloc, the concept of civilizational in-betweenness, as perceived by liberal Europeans, came to be predominantly associated with post-Soviet Eastern European nations.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has prompted a significant reevaluation of the mental maps of Europeans, leading to a re-examination of the very concept of Eastern Europe as an ideological construct.[5] This ideological construct has exhibited varied quasi-colonial characteristics throughout different historical periods. The idea of Belarus's in-betweenness has been a part of this historical context. In order to reveal the fundamental connection between the contentious ideological concept of Eastern Europe and the issue of Belarus' positioning within the European context, in the first part of the article I will compare two narratives about in-betweenness: Ignat

2) Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art*, 7.

3) Laczó, "Rethinking Eastern Europe," 80.

4) Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

5) See Bursztyka, "Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe" and Gornykh, "The Other Heading of Europe."

Abdziralovich's and Czesław Miłosz's. The former identifies himself as a Belarusian, while the latter identifies as an Eastern European. The subsequent part will be devoted to the heuristic potential of the concept of borderland. It is critical not only to identify a corresponding heuristic, but also to delineate its framework, that is, to provide a form of critical apology of the epistemology formed in the in-between position. In this regard, along with Abdziralovich's essay, we will also address the article "The Ethics of the Borderland" (1999) by the contemporary Belarusian thinker Ihar Babkou. In the third part, I will focus on a critical analysis of the mental pattern of in-betweenness from the perspective of the current political agenda in Europe. The critical analysis of the concept of "in-betweenness" will be conducted through the lens of the distinction between geocultural and geopolitical dimensions, a framework previously employed by Kundera in his renowned essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984). The text culminates with a series of concise recommendations, which are predicated on the overarching concept that the efficacious decolonization of Belarus demands a deviation from the prevailing paradigm of its in-between positionality.

The terms "in-betweenness" and "borderland" are employed in the text as both interchangeable and referring to each other. However, it is important to note that these terms do not constitute complete synonyms, as they each emphasize different aspects. The initial concept is more geopolitical in nature, while the subsequent concept is geocultural. The former concerns the positioning, while the latter pertains to the *modus vivendi*, which is characteristic of the disposition at issue.

1. Abdziralovich and Miłosz: The Complex of an Eastern European

From a biographical perspective, Abdziralovich (1896–1923) and Miłosz (1911–2004) stand as remarkably disparate figures, arguably incomparable in terms of their longevity, the extent of their contributions to European culture, and the magnitude of their renown. The parallels between them in terms of cultural self-definition are particularly noteworthy. Both scholars comprehend their identities through an intermediate position between two forms of sociality (i.e. sociocultural identity). The reasoning of both parties on this point follows much the same logic, which I aim to capture in this section. The commonality of their cultural logic is undoubtedly related to their place of birth: the first was born in Vilnius, the second in the village of Šeteniai, Kaunas County. Today

both places belong to Lithuania. However, Abdziralovich self-identifies as a Belarusian, while Miłosz identifies as Polish. This discrepancy is manifestly reflected in the titles of the books to which we will turn: *Eternal way. Study of the Belarusian Worldview* and *Rodzinna Europa (Native Realm)*, respectively. As indicated by the titles themselves, each of the authors proceeded from a distinct geocultural definition (scaling) of their place of origin, thereby exhibiting a divergent sense of belonging.

Therefore, a comparison must be made of the manner in which each of them unfolded the cultural logic of the borderland, despite their differing geographical definitions of the "subject" of this logic – the subject in the dual Foucauldian sense.[6] For Abdziralovich, the subject at hand was Belarusians; for Miłosz, the Eastern Europeans. Accordingly, for Abdziralovich, the experiential "entry point" into the logic in-between was the feeling of belonging to the Belarusian people; for Miłosz, it was the feeling of belonging to Eastern Europe. Thus, it is noteworthy that the discrepancy between them is also that between the national and supranational perspectives. This particular point will be revisited at a later time. The initial step is to identify the essential constitution of the experience of in-betweenness. The proposed interpretation of Abdziralovich and Miłosz's reasoning employs a form of phenomenological eidetic variation that diverges from its original Husserlian version.[7] By referring alternately to one and the other author and comparing their positions, a common logic or idea (an invariant) will be revealed, in relation to which the self-description of each of them appears as its variation.

A close examination of Abdziralovich's and Miłosz's accounts reveal three distinct stages in their depictions of in-betweenness. The first stage is the double negation stage. The self finds itself situated between two distinct civilizations, both of which are identified as alien. Abdziralovich describes it as follows: "Belarusians, akin to Ukrainians and Balkan Slavs, found themselves unable to align with either one or the other direction. We did not become the people of the East, but we did not accept the culture of the Western Europe either."[8] He moves further in concretizing the East and the West as Russia and Poland, respectively, according to the geopolitical disposition of Belarusians.

6) Foucault, "The Subject and Power."

7) Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie*.

8) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

The fundamental rationale underlying the critical cultural dissonance experienced by Belarusians in their interactions with both Eastern and Western neighbors is attributed to what Abdziralovich calls "forced messianism." This concept can be alternatively expressed as nationalistic imperialism. Therefore, despite the evident disparities in sociocultural types, Eastern and Western Europe are regarded by the Belarusian thinker as two distinct expressions of a shared geopolitical principle, characterized by systemic subjugation (violence) against the other nation. According to his interpretation of the social and political history of Eastern and Western Europe, both civilizations are distinguished by the establishment and dedication to rigid forms of life that subjugate the individual. In his metaphoric characterization of Russia and Poland, he observes that: "In both European cultures, life is mocked by form. In one culture, the form is a monolith; in the other, it is scattered into crystals."[9]

Miłosz starts his autobiographical book about Europe with the following words: "I decided to write a book about an Eastern European, born more or less when crowds in Paris and London were cheering the first aviators; about a man who cannot be fitted into stereotypes like the German *Ordnung* or the Russian âme slave."[10] Upon completion of the book, the reader will comprehend the rationale behind Miłosz's decision to characterize his protagonist as an Eastern European rather than a Pole. According to his confession, Miłosz was an example of "the mélange of Polish, Lithuanian, and German blood."[11] In his autobiographical narrative, he sought to prove that the cultural space between the German order and the expanse of the "mysterious Russian soul" was unique due to its cross-ethnicity and cross-nationality. That is to say, Eastern Europe is not merely a geographical region comprising a series of nations. As a cultural phenomenon, Eastern Europe is understood to be a space that emerged due to the irreducibility of its residents' cultural identities to one particular national (ethnic) identity. One can be an Eastern European, whether Polish or Czech, among other nationalities. However, Eastern European identity is not synonymous with Polish (or any other) nationalism. Therefore, it can be posited that a primary message conveyed by Miłosz pertains to the notion that the cross-national sharing of this space engenders the potential for

9) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

10) Miłosz, *Native Realm*, 3.

11) Ibid., 24.

surmounting inter-ethnic hostility that is precipitated by ethno-nationalist ideology. A comparison of the two variations of self-definition through double negation outlined above allows for the recognition of a unifying concept: the in-between form of life defines itself through the rejection of orders that leave no room for otherness.

The second stage is the stage of self-attention, of focusing on oneself after the double negation. To be more precise, it is the double negation that prompts an individual to concentrate on oneself. Abdziralovich and Miłosz demonstrate a striking similarity in their depictions of the fundamental experience of self-determination within this quasi-Kierkegaardian self-concentration. The primary finding of existential self-reflection is the recognition of a deficiency in form, that is the absence of a distinctly defined framework that delineates a given form of life. Miłosz's reflections in this regard closely resemble the academic style:

> In a certain sense I can consider myself a typical Eastern European. It seems to be true that this *differentia specifica* can be boiled down to a lack of form – both inner and outer. His good qualities – intellectual avidity, fervor in discussion, a sense of irony, freshness of feeling, spatial (or geographical) fantasy – derive from a basic weakness: he always remains an adolescent, governed by a sudden ebb or flow of inner chaos.[12]

Abdziralovich describes the in-between form of life under investigation in a similar way:

> The Belarusian case is often characterized as excessively vague, undefined, and devoid of a living spirit, a quality that could potentially grant Belarusians the right to a legitimate existence among other peoples. The vagueness of Belarusian culture is frequently interpreted as an indication of the spiritual death of the Belarusian people, as well as their inability to define their own ideal. From a formal perspective, it must be acknowledged that our culture is not clearly defined.[13]

12) Ibid., 67.

13) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

Despite the evident disparities between the two descriptions, the same structure of the experience of the self shows itself. The self is revealed to oneself in the mode of critical self-reflection. The self is originally given to oneself as un-formed. That is to say, their primary self-perception is a perception in terms of deficiency. The finding of oneself in-between suggests and actualizes a process of deficient subjectivation. This is the phenomenological interpretation of an "Eastern European complex," variations of which are evident in the respective testimonies of Abdziralovich and Miłosz. A Belarusian appears the vaguest version of an Eastern European, as cultural indefiniteness is combined here with a weak national subjecthood.

It is noteworthy that both authors do not consider deficient self-determination to be the final word in the description of the in-between positionality. In both authors, critical self-diagnosis is followed by the characteristic antithetical reasoning designating the transition to the third stage, which opens a kind of positive (affirmative) perspective in the in-betweenness as a particular *modus vivendi*.

Miłosz, having established the lack of form as a distinguishing trait of the Eastern European, proceeds as follows:

> Form is achieved in stable societies… . It takes no small amount of energy simply to plant one's feet on solid ground without falling… . Doubtless, in order to construct a form one needs a certain number of widely accepted certainties, some kind of background of conformity to rebel against, which nonetheless generates a framework that is stronger than consciousness.[14]

In a similar vein, Abdziralovich, having acknowledged the Belarusians' absence of a clearly defined culture, proffers the following objection to preclude potential adverse inferences: "From a formal perspective, it must be acknowledged that our culture is not clearly defined. This should not, however, be interpreted as a spiritual deficiency in our people, or their inability to independently produce their own forms of life."[15] Furthermore, Abdziralovich distances himself from the "solid" forms, which he

14) Miłosz, *Native Realm*, 67.

15) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

identifies in the imperial neighbors, concluding that "a form that flows, changes, and always responds to life's manifestations is required."[16]

At this juncture, the method of eidetic variation proves advantageous not only in identifying a common idea in the self-definition of the in-between self, but also in capturing significant differences between the variations under consideration. The general idea, or invariant essence, of the in-between self is that such a self is capable of taking shape (form). Furthermore, the manner in which this form is acquired is a distinctive feature of subjectivation. Consequently, the search for form manifests as a positive *differentia specifica* of the Eastern European, thereby transforming his/her/their primary deficiency into the dialectical element of the constitutive openness of the self toward possible forms.

In consideration of the differences between the two approaches, it is evident that Miłosz and Abdziralovich address the issue of form from disparate perspectives. This discrepancy in their approaches may initially give rise to the perception that their judgments are antithetical. In the former case, the acquisition of form signifies the gradual assimilation of a pre-reflexive normative and axiological framework, enabling the establishment of a sense of stability and grounding. In the latter case, it refers to the capacity to cultivate an alternative form of life, one that is resistant to the violence imposed by Western and Eastern forms. One could argue that for Miłosz, the acquisition of form is more of a cultural issue, while for Abdziralovich, it is a cultural-political issue. This discrepancy is attributable to their distinct initial motivations, which we previously referred to as the "entry point" into the logic of in-between. For Miłosz, the crux of the matter lies in demonstrating that his cultural identity is not confined to the national boundaries but is instead shaped by the intricate cross-national entanglements that characterize the Eastern European region. These entanglements encompass a diverse array of factors, including the dissemination of novel social trends and political ideologies, advancements in science and technology, and so forth. For Abdziralovich, however, the issue at hand is that of national culture, namely the delineation of a distinct form of life that could be designated as Belarusian as opposed to Russian or Polish. His motivation is political in nature, as his paramount concern is the

16) Ibid.

national subjecthood of Belarusians – that is, their right to "legitimate existence among other peoples."[17]

Thus, the divergent interpretations of the form indicate not the opposite of their views, but rather the asymmetry of their initial situations in terms of the national question. For Miłosz, the developed national consciousness of Poles is a cultural and political fact, an important element of the socio-historical context in which he thinks. Therefore, his attention is focused on the specifics of the formation of his cultural identity, not just as a Pole, but as an Eastern European. This approach enables him to mount a persuasive cultural-anthropological (autoethnographic) argument against the chauvinistic tendencies inherent in Polish nationalism. In the context of Abdziralovich, the issue of concern pertains to the weak national subjecthood of Belarusians, a consequence of centuries of oppression due to Russian and Polish domination. Consequently, he identifies the primary objective as the elucidation of an alternative form of life through which the cultural identity of Belarusians manifests itself in an authentic manner and thus contributes to national self-assertion.

In summary, from the phenomenological point of view, the two authors develop very similar descriptions of the constitution of the experience of self, situated in-between. However, a notable methodological difference exists between the two approaches. Abdziralovich underscores a geopolitical perspective of inter-imperiality, which hinders the evolution of national culture. In Miłosz, the geocultural perspective "discovers" a distinct cultural type in an Eastern European, situated between the West and Russia. Accordingly, a secondary conclusion that can be drawn is that the self-definition (understanding of the self in terms of) in-between relies on a specific intertwining of geocultural and geopolitical aspects. In order to analyze the in-between experience, it is crucial to distinguish between geocultural and geopolitical dimensions, and to clarify the relation between them in each case. In this regard, it is important to note that Kundera's thesis about the "kidnapped" Central Europe was founded on the fundamental distinction between the (geo-)cultural and the (geo-)political. The distinction was articulated with remarkable poignancy: "By virtue of its political system, Central Europe is the East; by virtue of its cultural history, it is the West."[18]

17) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

18) Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

2. Phenomenology of the Belarusian Borderland: A Heuristic of the In-between Positionality

The manner in which Abdziralovich analyzes the experience of self-definition within the inter-imperial positionality warrants his designation as the first Belarusian decolonial thinker. As illustrated above, the three stages of self-definition can be conceptualized as representing a trajectory of decolonization, which is defined as the process of liberation from the oppressive state (or "subaltern state") that is shaped by a dual imperial dominance. In this regard, Abdziralovich's substantial contribution lies in the formulation of the phenomenology of the borderland, a concept that transcends the conventional, one-dimensional comprehension of Belarusians as a "backward nation" consigned to the vicissitudes of an unfavorable geopolitical context. Abdziralovich's conceptual innovation consists in the dialectical interpretation of the specific interregnum of Belarusians. Acknowledging the calamitous historical circumstances of the Belarusian people, situated between two empires, he reinterprets this positionality as one that engenders the potential for creative self-assertion. Elsewhere, I called this strategy the "philosophical salto vitale" of Abdziralovich.[19]

Abdziralovich supposes that the socio-historical experience of Belarusians, characterized by an enduring state of indefiniteness, reveals indefiniteness (or the state of being in the open process of becoming), as a paradigmatic condition inherent to the phenomenon of living (both on an individual and a community level). In other words, this experience has its own heuristics, indicating that a different interpretation of non-determined subjectivity is possible, one that is not constrained by the classical modern concept of the subject as fixed and stable. Therefore, by posing the question of the self-determination of Belarusians, Abdziralovich makes a kind of ontological turn that aligns with Bergson's philosophy of life. His repudiation of Eastern and Western forms of life as unsuitable for Belarusians is, at its core, a repudiation of the classical understanding of the subject as self-sufficient, stable, and definite. Contrary to the traditional conception of the subject, Abdziralovich unveils an alternative form of subject, articulated through the conceptual metaphor of "fluid form":

19) Shchyttsova, ""The Attitude of Modernity" of Ignat Abdzyralovich."

> One should remember that life flows, that the human soul does not stand, that man must adjust his life as it develops and flows… . In the adjustment of life forms to this changeability, fluidity, in the search for life forms elastic, flowing, changeable is the meaning of the future, the content of the individual and social ideal.[20]

Abdziralovich's approach exemplifies an epistemology that takes shape in a position between two imperial centers of knowledge-power. The in-between positionality is both analyzed and embodied (performatively articulated) by the Belarusian thinker as a positionality that engenders counter-hegemonic resistance and is a site where the produced knowledge claims universal relevance. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that Abdziralovich's novel interpretation of the subject is closely intertwined with the principle of non-violence. "Let us not create violence and suffering either for others or for ourselves: there should be no Belarusian messianism."[21] This appeal can be regarded as Abdziralovich's primary ethico-political imperative, which is anchored in the "affective structure of understanding"[22] characteristic of the interimperial positionality of Belarusians. The historical background of his revolutionary conceptualization of "fluidity" as a non-violent form of subjecthood is Belarusians' collective experience of long-lasting systematic violent suppression of the very possibility to socially and culturally develop. This suppression has taken various forms, including the prohibition to speak and teach in the Belarusian language and the physical extermination of Belarusians.

The two-dimensionality of Abdziralovich's principle of non-violence ("neither for others nor for ourselves") clearly reflects the two aspects of the concept of state sovereignty: outward and inward.[23] Therefore, from the perspective of international relations, his novel conception of subjecthood entails a repudiation of the "nationalism of conquest."[24] From the vantage point of domestic governance, his imperative

20) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

21) Ibid.

22) Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality*, 20.

23) Cf. Wallerstein, *The End of the World*, 60.

24) Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," 45.

for non-violence gives rise to a programmatic assertion concerning the necessity of establishing non-coercive forms of social association. "What exists now: coercive economy, authorities, hard law, prison, punishment, is the result of human, civic non-creation. This will all disappear, not under coercion, not destroyed by force, but by further human creativity."[25]

Thus, the decolonial approach of the Belarusian thinker also encompassed a critique of the "frozen" (fixed) social (institutional) forms characteristic of the bureaucratic structure of the modern state (including the new socialist state built by communists). A paradigmatic example of a non-coercive form for Abdziralovich was the contemporary cooperative movement, which he actively promoted.[26]

Abdziralovich's interpretation of the interimperial positionality of Belarusians exhibits only a partial overlap with the concept of interimperiality developed by Laura Doyle. The latter pertains to the global geopolitical dynamics that have been evolving over millennia. "The *inter-* of *inter-imperiality* refers to multiply vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires."[27] Doyle's approach is predicated on the notion of global interdependence among all actors, encompassing both imperial and (anti-)colonial ones. She proposes an alternative framework for examining the intricate dynamics of power relations and resistance. Rather than employing the conventional center-periphery dichotomy, she advocates for a more nuanced approach, emphasizing global co-constitution.[28] According to this logic, she seeks to demonstrate that colonized communities are "facing off against not merely one empire but a horizon of maneuvering empires" and that the colonized territories in question should not be understood as peripheries but as "strategic interimperial zones, again and again vied over for their resources (including laborers) and their geopolitical location."[29] Doyle's analysis, while acknowledging "the multifaceted struggles of communities," employs a broad interpretation of interimperiality that is both geographically and historically extensive. Her approach, which addresses "multiple

25) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

26) Regarding this, see Novik, "Pomimo Abdziralovicha."

27) Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality*, 4.

28) Ibid., 18 f.

29) Ibid., 15–16.

interacting empires," allows for the inclusion of the case of Belarus (as a sub-case of Eastern Europe, which Doyle mentions), into the global program of strategic repositioning of colonized communities. However, it does not capture the specific meaning of the interimperial positionality of Belarusians described by Abdziralovich.

In the case of Belarus, the term "interimperiality" refers to a distinct in-between position that is inherently liminal. Abdziralovich delineates this phenomenon in two perspectives: regional and national. The region of borderland is the territory where the separation of Western European and Eastern European civilizations takes place. As he notes, "The border between the two spheres of influence, dividing Slavic peoples into two camps, runs through Belarus and Ukraine and hides in the Balkan lands."[30] The national (Belarusian) perspective is defined by the situatedness between Russia and Poland as confronting imperial poles. The national community, situated between these two extremes, acquires the genuine character of liminality. Therefore, the terms "in-between" and "borderland" are conceptually intertwined, with each word's meaning complementing the other. This semantic interplay serves to establish the foundational framework for understanding the experience of interimperiality. In addressing this experience, Abdziralovich managed to reveal its existentially significant heuristics, which helped to go beyond the traditional tropes of deficiency (backwardness, inferiority, inarticulateness), in characterizing Belarusians as a nation.

At the end of the 1990s, the notion of borderland was reconsidered and reactualized in the oeuvre of the contemporary Belarusian writer and philosopher Ihar Babkou. His program text, "Этыка памежжа: транскультурнасць як беларускі досвед" ("Ethics of the Borderland: Transculturality as Belarusian Experience") (1999) could be symbolically labeled as Abdziralovich 2.0. The liminal ("transitive") subjecthood (identity) was again interpreted not in terms of deficiency but rather as a remarkable constitutive feature of Belarusians. Babkou offered a reconceptualization of Abdziralovich's approach, situating it within a novel cultural and social-political context. This reconceptualization involved the development of a sophisticated description of the dialectics of the borderland. "Borderland lies on both sides of the border, and its topological status is paradoxical: borderland acquires a certain integrity through the fact of its own separation, i.e. through the dynamic

30) Abdziralovich, *Advyechnym shlyakham*.

event of delimitation, encounter and transition of the Familiar and the Alien, or the One and the Other."[31]

Abdziralovich revealed the "fluid" form of subjecthood, while Babkou, in turn, focused on transitivity (cultural transgression) as a dialectical structure of this fluidity. He comments as follows: "By the term transculturality we will here understand – in the most general sense – cultural transcendence, the mismatch of culture (and cultures) with its spatio-temporal localization and textual presence, the diverse practices of cultural transgressions."[32]

In a manner similar to Abdziralovich, Babkou discerns the existential specificity of the liminal form of life of Belarusians in the constitutive indefiniteness (lack of fixed identity[33]) and insists on overturning the traditional perception of Belarusians "balancing between" in terms of weakness, underdevelopment, and cultural absence. As with Abdziralovich, a different epistemology is outlined by Babkou on the basis of the self-reflection of borderland subjectivity. In other words, a novel approach has been developed as the result of a genuine heuristic peculiar to the "in-between" life form. As previously demonstrated in Abdziralovich, the borderland heuristic suggests a substantial critique of the classical concept of the full-fledged subject (self-identical, autonomous, monologic). Babkou's existential dialectic of the borderland extends this critique of the philosophical discourse of European (Western) modernity by revealing the irrelevance of the image of a homogeneous national culture to the culture of the borderland. The critical perspective inherent in the heuristic of borderland calls into question the validity of the modern image of the subject as well as the normative validity of the image of a self-identical national culture, which Babkou calls "the cultural utopia of European modernity."[34]

As Babkou's article illustrates, seventy years following the publication of Abdziralovich's essay, the decolonial stance of critical self-knowledge had persisted in its pertinence for the post-Soviet generation of Belarusian intellectuals. This stance

31) Babkou, "Etyka pamyezhzha."

32) Ibid.

33) A liminal form of life means that "the process of individual self-identification with the entire cultural space is not purely an event of joining a given identity, but rather a process of balancing-between in a polycentric space of cultural diversity." (Ibid.)

34) Ibid.

liberates individuals from the deficient self-image imposed by the Other. Furthermore, the term "Other" in this context is a symbolic complex designation, as it encompasses the convergence of multiple "Others" and correspondingly their multiple lenses through which the deficient image of Belarusians is formed. The following perspectives are salient in this context: 1) the imperial perspective "from the West and from the East," which positions Belarusians as subalterns in accordance with the center-periphery dichotomy; 2) the perspective of modern philosophy, defined by the classical concept of the subject; and 3) the perspective of modern political thought, defined by the idea of homogeneous national identity. Maria Todorova succinctly encapsulated the prevailing sense arising in those who have been seen through these lenses, articulating it as a "sense of [temporal] lag and lack." In an article published in the same year as Babkou's essay, she states: "This sense of lag and lack, analytically subsumed in the notion of backwardness, has been a dominant trope not only in non-European historiographies… . It is still ubiquitous in Eastern Europe."[35]

3. A Critique of the Mental Pattern of "In-betweenness" from the Perspective of the Distinction between Geocultural and Geopolitical Dimensions

Despite recognizing the heuristic significance of the borderland phenomenology discussed above, I argue that this theoretical framework cannot address the challenges faced by Belarusians as a national community after 2020 and 2022. I posit that the current situation is characterized by a new relationship between the (geo)cultural and (geo)political dimensions, necessitating a new language of description and new political solutions at the national, regional, and global levels.

Undoubtedly, the socio-political contexts of the 1921 and 1999 essays were significantly different. Yet, the concept of "in-between" remained relevant in both contexts, appearing in the texts of Abdziralovich and Babkou as a historical iteration. Abdziralovich's essay was written in the context of a large-scale nation-building process in Europe that culminated in the formation of new nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe. This process was a consequence of the collapse of empires and the First World War. Following the failure of the Belarusian People's Republic

35) Todorova, "The Trap of Backwardness," 145.

(*BNR*) project[36] and the Red Army's takeover of Belarus in 1918, Belarusians' political future as a nation became tied to the formation of the new Bolshevik state. In 1921, Abdziralovich could still critically discuss the various party ideologies of the time, including Bolshevism. Moreover, since his notion of "fluid form" was structural rather than essentialist, it transcended the essentialist discourse of ethnic nationalism and the opposition between primordialism and constructivism. He distinguished Belarusians as a cultural-historical community not in terms of "what?" but in terms of "how?" – that is, through the description of the basic form of life (the principle of "fluidity"), and the ethos (the principle of nonviolence). This approach ensured openness to multicultural interaction, which was important given Belarus's multilingual and multireligious character at that time.

Thus, in Abdziralovich's interpretation of interimperiality, the geocultural and geopolitical dimensions were considered congruent. Furthermore, interimperial positionality was interpreted dialectically. On the one hand, it suppressed agency and development opportunities. On the other hand, it created structural preconditions for specific heuristics peculiar to the "in-between" form of life. However, realizing the creative potential of this form of life depended on how the new socialist state, which included Belarus as a separate republic, developed. While this issue could still be discussed with some hope during Abdziralovich's lifetime, the 1930s were already marked by the systematic repression and extinction of leading representatives of Belarusian culture.

Babkou reactualized the idea of the borderland during a period when Belarus, having gained state independence in 1991, was discursively positioned in the European and global context as a post-Soviet country. In the same year that Babkou's essay was published, David Marple's book *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* was published, the title of which unambiguously pointed to the weak national consciousness among Belarusian citizens. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, researchers identified two primary versions of national identity in Belarus: the official, neo-Soviet

36) The Belarusian People's Republik (*Bielaruskaia Narodnaja Respublika*, BNR) was the first Belarusian state that was founded in spring, 1918. It declared independence on March 25, 1918 in Minsk, when Belarus was occupied by the German army. Although the Belarusian state existed for a short period of time (and its independence was more symbolic than real), its declaration was a very important historical event. It laid the foundation for the future national sovereignty of the Belarusians, which they finally attained in 1991.

version and the opposition, national revivalist version.[37] These versions diverged in terms of language policy, interpretation of history, and geopolitical priorities. The official national discourse was based on Soviet-era ideology and myths supporting the historical unity of Belarusians and Russians. The national revival discourse promoted by the Belarusian Popular Front Adradzhennie was based on ethno-cultural nationalism. However, the noted polarization of the two national projects was a schematic generalization that did not reflect the complexity of national identity issues in changing Belarusian society. Notable examples of national identity discourse that cannot be reduced to the aforementioned poles include the work of Valiantsin Akudovich, who criticizes both Soviet national policy and the *Adradzhennie* discourse;[38] Ihar Babkou's rethinking of the cultural identity of Belarusians in terms of borderland (*памежжа*); and Vladimir Abushenko's elaboration of the concept of Creole nationalism.[39] According to Babkou's notion of borderland transculturality, the question of identity is freed from the necessity of identification with one or another pole: "The Belarusian cultural space exhibits a complex configuration of biculturalism, consisting of the coexistence of Belarusian and West Russian parts within semi-defined boundaries."[40]

It is not difficult to identify complementarity between the oppositions "neo-Soviet versus national revival" and "West Russian versus Belarusian," though one should not conflate them. The historical marker "West Russian" (relating to the ideology of "West Russianism") points to the imperial subordination and resignification of Belarusian lands by Russia. Regarding post-Soviet Belarus, this term can be interpreted through the lens of not only postcoloniality but also neocoloniality, as Lukashenko's neo-Soviet approach prevented Belarusian society's liberation from cultural colonization by the "Russian world."[41] On the contrary, the term "Belarusian part" can be interpreted as a symbolic marker of a national culture free from colonial subjugation. "Belarusian" and "West Russian" are symbolic definitions with no fixed territorial reference. Thus,

37) Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity*.

38) Akudovich, *Kod adsutnastsi*.

39) Abushenko, "Kreol'stvo kak ino-modernost'."

40) Babkou, "Etyka pamyezhzha."

41) Cf. Hancock, "The Semi-Sovereign State."

from the perspective of the identity issue formulated at stage Abdziralovich 1.0, the Soviet period brought about a paradigmatic shift: the former external geopolitical borders of inter-imperial positionality (between West/Poland and East/Russia) transformed into internal symbolic dichotomies that structure the Belarusian cultural space as a space of transgression. Rethinking the trope of borderland, Babkou explicitly establishes the historical and cultural continuity between the two iterations of Belarusian discourse "in-between": "The sources of transculturality in the Belarusian tradition are twofold: existence in a civilizational rupture zone and colonial, neo-, and postcolonial practices."[42]

The immanentization and resignification of the initial imperial differentiation "West/East" in Belarusian culture highlights the post-Soviet situation as "postcolonial" while preserving a vague relation to the West as an external reference point. This external reference point is no longer embodied concretely in the political-imperial body of neighboring Poland. Yet, it remains present as the horizon of the "great" narrative of the Other. As Babkou emphasizes, mastering this narrative cannot help us understand contemporary Belarusian culture or ourselves. In this respect, his essay can be read as a decolonial gesture that emphasizes the existential and epistemological necessity of "creating knowledge about ourselves" rooted in our geocultural situatedness. In the aftermath of the 70-year Soviet era, Babkou reproduces Abdziralovich's agenda; again, it is about the need for self-definition and self-understanding in a liminal position between Russia and the West. This decolonial gesture paves the way for a new politics of knowledge production that is built on double decenteredness in relation to alleged centers of knowledge and power in the West and East ("Moscow"). Notably, in relation to the West, Babkou's decolonial gesture aligns more closely with thinkers from the Global South. Conversely, in relation to Russia, it aligns more closely with the positions of Miłosz and Kundera.

Neither Abdziralovich nor Babkou addresses the political question of attaining national sovereignty. In a sense, this issue was resolved within their historical contexts: in the 1920s, with the formation of the Soviet state, and in the 1990s, with its collapse. For both authors, the pressing issue is national identity – specifically, national self-determination and self-understanding. In the 1920s, Belarus's cultural space was

42) Babkou, "Etyka pamyezhzha."

multi-ethnic, while the Republic of Belarus, which emerged in 1991, was defined as a mono-ethnic state, as substantiated by statistical data. However, like Abdziralovich in the 1920s, Babkou opposes the perception that both external and internal observers attribute to Belarusians: weak national consciousness and identity. Babkou deconstructs this diagnosis, showing that it only makes sense within the framework of modernity's idea of a homogeneous national culture whose borders coincide with political borders. For both Abdziralovich and Babkou, the immanent transitivity of the Belarusian cultural space is historically conditioned by the pre-Soviet in-between positionality of Belarusians. Therefore, the question of the genealogy of the transcultural Belarusian reality is of primary importance to him.

Let us try to summarize the relationship between the geocultural and geopolitical aspects in Babkou's approach. It is not simple because it has two layers. The first layer is a relationship of congruence, which was also characteristic of Abdziralovich. For him, the issue of interimperial positionality was on the agenda. For Belarusians, this meant political subordination and unarticulated culture. In Babkou's reasoning, this layer is present as historical background. The second layer concerns the post-Soviet present, analyzed by Babkou. Here, the relationship between the geocultural and the geopolitical changes radically due to Belarus gaining political sovereignty. Consequently, the vision of interimperiality also changes. First, the imperial poles are asymmetric. One is a single country, while the other is a "global" region (the West). Second, Babkou uses two lenses: (1) a postcolonial lens in relation to Russia and (2) a decolonial lens similar to that of the Global South in relation to the West (the discourse of Western modernity).

Thus, Babkou focuses on the cultural sphere – the inherent transcultural nature of national identity in the era of cultural globalization. The political dimension of the nation-state is taken as a given, against which the question of cultural politics – decentered cultural practices that reveal and develop an original "borderland culture" – comes to the fore. In a sense, the political "moves" into the spheres of culture and knowledge production. Moreover, changes in the cultural sphere are conditioned by relations of power,[43] structured "from the outside" in accordance with interimperial positionality

43) Cf. "Behind any frontal changes in cultural space, no matter how natural these changes look, is the phenomenon of power." (Babkou, "Etyka pamyezhzha.")

and "from the inside" in accordance with immanent biculturality, which goes back to the pre-Soviet interimperiality of Belarusians. Consequently, Babkou defines the cultural space of the borderland in terms of conflict and "war of cultures."

I argue that the historical and theoretical limits of conceptualizing Belarusian identity in terms of in-betweenness can be revealed through the lens of distinguishing between geocultural and geopolitical dimensions and the changing relationship between them. Today, the fixation on the trope of in-betweenness may indicate that one's thinking has fallen into a trap that Todorova defined as the *trap of origins, which carries backwardness as its corollary.*[44] The events of 2020 and 2022 problematized the relevance of the interimperial positionality theory between Western Europe and Russia, at the very least. In 2020, Belarus's pro-democracy civil society could have echoed Kundera's words upon realizing how similar the Belarusian tragedy was to the "tragedy of Central Europe." Western politicians were "in no hurry" to support the Belarusian revolution. This was most likely because they traditionally perceived Belarus as "just part of the Soviet [Russian – TSh] empire."[45] Meanwhile, the radical difference between Lukashenko's political regime and the political culture of the protest community caused Western media to portray Belarusians as a European nation committed to European values.

Kundera essentially reproduces Miłosz's trope of "in-betweenness" when he writes that the peoples of Central Europe are "sandwiched between Germans and Russians."[46] For the purposes of this article, it is important to emphasize that Kundera's description of Western Europe's lack of empathy toward the "small peoples" of Central Europe does not lead him to distance himself from "the West" to cultivate his own "in-betweenness." Rather, he criticizes the West to reclaim and develop a multidimensional European cultural space.

In his poignant essay, Kundera writes of Russia's obsession with "the determination to turn all the peoples of its empire – Ukrainians, Belarusians, Armenians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and others – into a single Russian people, or, as is commonly expressed in our era of universal mystification of word, into a 'single Soviet people.'"

44) Todorova, "The Trap of Backwardness," 147.

45) Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

46) Ibid.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, as well as the many other wars Russia has unleashed in the post-Soviet region, irrefutably disavow this hoax. After 2020, and especially after 2022, Belarus can also be described in Kundera's words as part of Europe subjected to pro-Russian ideological treatment that persists in defending its essence against all odds. In a sense, one might say that this war made the West think like Kundera, expanding his approach to former post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe, such as Belarus and Ukraine. However, Kundera prioritized European culture, while politicians supporting Ukraine prioritize European security. In this regard, I would like to conclude by proposing the idea that it is necessary to bridge the critical gap between the two mental maps of Europe, as diagnosed by Ukrainian and Belarusian intellectuals today. There is a discrepancy between the political map, on which Ukraine and Belarus are important factors of European security, and the cultural map, on which Ukraine and Belarus are understudied and scarcely understood countries.

To achieve a new congruence between the (geo-)political and the (geo-)cultural in Europe, politicians and intellectuals (cultural workers, academics, and journalists) must collaborate. These two dimensions are essentially interdependent. It will be difficult to successfully counteract Russian neo-imperialism if Western societies continue to view our countries in the most favorable cultural and historical way for Russia, as its inseparable satellites or quasi-subalterns. As Ferenc Laczó noted in an earlier quoted article: "When it comes to Eastern Europe, cultural demi-Orientalization and socioeconomic semi-peripheralization appear to have gone hand in hand."[47] Today, we can echo this statement by saying that geopolitical changes in Belarus and Ukraine as Eastern European countries are impossible without geocultural changes; the two must be realized together. The question of European security is intrinsically linked to a conceptual rethinking of Europe as both a geopolitical and geocultural space. Overcoming traditional mental patterns of inter-imperiality (in-betweenness) is an integral part of this process.

47) Laczó, "Rethinking Eastern Europe in European Studies," 85. Cf., Wallerstein, *The End of the World*, 60.

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