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The Politics of “Europe”

Abstract: This chapter examines how post-socialist leaders sought to establish their respective nation states as ‘European’ leading up to and immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The chapter examines three discursive strategies deployed by CEE elites to secure their belonging in Europe: situating their nation at the center of Europe, the border of Europe, and in a sub-region of Europe. Through comparative case studies of Estonia and Slovenia, the chapter shows how these strategies served a dual function. Externally they were targeted to EU leaders to advance full and rapid inclusion into European institutions. Internally they were deployed to unify newly independent nation-states around a common European identity, often in opposition to ‘other’ outside (and in some cases within) national borders.

Keywords: Clash of Civilizations; Cold War; Europeanization; return to Europe; Yugonostalgia

This chapter examines how CEE leaders sought to establish their respective nation states as ‘European’ leading up to and immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall. While most CEE elites embraced the discourse of the ‘return to Europe’, they did not necessarily specify to which kind of ‘Europe’ they sought to return. Meanwhile, European leaders were facing their own identity crisis as to what defines ‘Europe’ with the end of the Cold War. The chapter examines three discursive strategies deployed by CEE elites to secure their belonging in Europe: situating themselves at the center of Europe, the border of Europe, and in a sub-region of Europe. These strategies served a dual function. Externally they were targeted to EU leaders to advance their full and rapid inclusion into European institutions. Internally they deployed as a means of unifying newly independent nation-states around a common European identity, and most often in opposition to ‘other’ outside (and in some cases within) national borders. The next section outlines these three strategies more generally, before turning to an in-depth comparison of Estonia and Slovenia.

The ‘return to Europe’: three discursive strategies

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 prompted euphoric declarations in Western and Eastern Europe that the continent, divided throughout the Cold War, would once again be ‘whole and free’. Leaders of East European national independence movements rallied around slogans declaring their desire to ‘return to Europe’. West European leaders responded in kind with promises to reunify East and West. French Prime Minister François Mitterand proclaimed in 1989, for example, that Europe would soon extend ‘from the Atlantic to the Urals’. Once European leaders began to grapple with fashioning concrete policies for enlargement, however, contentious questions arose concerning boundaries (Where does Europe begin and end?), identity (Who is European?), and ideas (What is Europe?). When CEE leaders demanded a full ‘return to Europe’ most leaders were acutely aware that their national self-understandings as belonging to Europe did not necessarily correspond with external perceptions. As Gal (1991) suggests, the rhetorical slogan ‘return to Europe’ suggests such a duality, for one must return to a place where it currently does not belong.

The first discursive strategy involved re-positioning post-socialist states at the center of Europe. Beginning in the early 1980s, dissident