

The East (is not the) edge

Recently several members of a rather respectable international society of physical planners and urbanists asked me to run for office in its executive council as a representative of Eastern Europe. Geographically and historically most of them considered this the space where until the fall of the iron curtain socialism was being developed and communists were its masters. I found Slovenia being seen as part of that lot in the given historical moment neither accurate nor correct, but not altogether wrong. However, since I am aware of my western colleague's knowledge about history and geography, as well as still living caution about anything eastern, I agreed. They still deal with the East with utmost respect and understand it as a territorial and menacing political entity.

Some members from countries lying further East didn't find my candidacy as appropriate, i.e. somebody from a country that will soon be a full member of the West, being represented as an easturopean. Slovenia was in fact playing its last acts of homologisation with the European Union and membership was a matter of weeks. A serious situation was brewing so the submitters of my candidacy called me to explain and thus save them and myself. Instead of giving a political elaboration about the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Warsaw pact I resorted to geography. First I explained that geographically and mathematically, the centre of Europe is in Belarus or Lithuania (depending on who's doing the measuring), so I was the wrong candidate, since Slovenia lies in the western part of such an agglomeration. Furthermore, such geographical determination and all the discussion, including my explanation, were pointless, since everybody knows that the East begins in Greenwich, east of London. Almost all of Europe therefore lies in the East; one European country actually stretches all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Geographical division into »us« and »them« is therefore arbitration about where the East begins, and I suggested better eliminating criteria, such as level of education, knowledge of languages, dedication to the profession, capacity for networking etc. The territorial framework is surely an important part of identity, surely as important as history and politics. But nevertheless, can only a century of history give absolute definition of many centuries of history and civilisation of almost half of Europe? My explanation wasn't to the liking of either, members from countries before and after the fallen iron curtain. Then my Austrian colleagues intervened and claimed that their capital city lies further east than the Slovene one. But that was easy to say, Austria has for decades represented itself and acted as the bridge between old and new, Eastern Europe. They are also experiencing an unstoppable desire for absorbing everything eastern and Mediterranean. Political action overlaps cultural enterprise. The Styria cultural festivals in Graz for example shun old fears and gush eastern ecstasy and balkanic passion in all fields of cultural activity. We in Slovenia have the Dragačevo trumpeters. Surely we know where we are and where we came from, but we could nevertheless take a look further east.

Ivan Stanič