

## Where Is Europe?

By Frank Jacobs

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Where is Europe? You might as well ask: What is Europe? For it is a concept as well as a continent, and the borders of both oscillate wildly. For the ancient Persians, it was that small stepping stone separating them from Greece. In the Middle Ages, it became virtually synonymous with Christendom. A relatively recent and generally unaccepted theory sees Europe spanning half the globe, from Iceland to the Bering Strait, nearly touching Alaska.

Take the most common present-day usage of the term “Europe,” shorthand for (and synonymous with) the European Union. The external borders of this supranational project are well-defined, and in some cases well-defended. But they remain movable, having consistently shifted outward over the last half century. From a core of six founding members in the continent’s west [1], this “Europe” has expanded to comprise 27 states, as far east as Cyprus.

That still leaves quite some wriggle room between concept and continent, which by some estimates [2] includes as many as 51 countries. For those in between, the difference is clear and uncontested. Even non-European Union members like Switzerland and Croatia, close to the continent’s geographic core, will readily admit that they’re outside “Europe” (but only if you include the quotation marks). The interesting difference is that the Swiss overall are happy to remain outside, while the Croats generally can’t wait for July 2013, when they’re slated to join the Union.

This gap in Euro-euphoria is a symptom of a curious kaleidoscopic quality of this supranational “Europe”: Everybody is looking at the same thing, but everybody sees something different. For the Swiss, who have a long history of non-alignment (and a shorter one of being confidently rich), joining “Europe” would entail few benefits. By contrast, for the non-“European” remainder on the Balkans [3], similarly encircled by member states, joining would be almost more of a moral vindication than an economic relief. Like the countries of the former Eastern Bloc before them, membership would confirm their Europeanness.

As a frequent visitor to the Balkans recently put it to me: “In the Croats’ own eyes, they are the last bastion of Europe against the barbarians, the first of which are the Serbs. The Serbs too view themselves as Europe’s ultimate bulwark, against the Albanians.” And so on.

What’s interesting is that such kaleidoscopic assessments of what is and isn’t Europe exist within the Union, too. But instead of positive images, the E.U. kaleidoscope refracts nothing but horrors. Here, “Europe” has become the convenient scapegoat for anything too unpopular, expensive or painful to be defended by the individual member states. “We don’t like it either,” they can tell their electorates, “but Europe is making us do it.” Europe, long the defining inclusive quality uniting people from Spain to Finland, is now, ironically, the oppressive other.

This “Europe” is a misassembled, headless monster, owing less to Charlemagne than to Frankenstein. It stalks the bureaucratic labyrinth of Brussels, baying for tribute from the peoples of Europe. But this modern minotaur is also a petty, powerless bureaucrat, issuing directives on the correct curvature of cucumbers [4], but unable to save the euro from collapsing.

To the British, “Europe” and “the Continent” are increasingly one and the same, and they find increasing consolation in their splendid isolation from it. Strictly geographically speaking, they’re not wrong. A continent may be defined as a large, contiguous land mass, sans the islands off its coast. Of course, the choice of terminology is suggested more by the rise of anti-E.U. sentiment in Britain rather than by concerns for geographic rectitude. An equally acceptable definition of a continent does include so-called continental islands [5] – situated on the continental shelf, as Britain and Ireland are. An even broader definition includes islands off the shelf (so to speak), if they are geographically and culturally proximate. Cyprus, Malta and Iceland are all considered European because of historical, political and cultural links, even though none of them is entirely located on Europe’s continental shelf.

Yet if we leave the islands out of the equation for a moment, most of Europe’s borders are self-evident. They are the waters that border it on three sides: the Arctic Sea to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Mediterranean and Black Seas to the south. Ah, but then the ultimate problem becomes painfully clear: Where to draw Europe’s eastern border? And does it even have one?

Let’s return to our earlier definition: A continent is a large, contiguous land mass. And not half of one. Many geographers see what we call the European continent as a mere peninsula of a gigantic continent of Eurasia, spanning halfway across the world, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Bering Strait. There is no good reason to divide that continent in two. No good geographic reason.

For, etymologically, “Eurasia” might well be a union of opposites. Some linguists suggest that Europe and Asia derive from words in Phoenician and Assyrian for “sunset” and “sunrise” respectively, similar to the Latin concepts of “occidens” and “oriens,” or simply our “west” and “east.”

In fact, in its earliest incarnation, Europe was merely that bit of land on the continent that the Persians had to cross to get from the Hellespont [6] to Greece proper. Ironically, 25 centuries later, the perception of that region has totally reversed. Greece is now firmly part of Europe (both the concept and the continent), while that former Persian stepping stone is now known as Turkish Thrace [7]. Its existence embarrasses those who would deny Turkey E.U. membership on the basis that it is “not a European state.” It is. And what’s more: based on ancient history, Turkey (or at least this part of it) can claim to be the original Europe.

Turkey's detractors have another Europe in mind. This one took shape in the early Middle Ages, as "Europe" became a constituent third of the world in simplified ecclesiastical geography, together with Africa and Asia converging on Jerusalem – the center of the world. From the 13th century onward, encroachment by the Tartars (in Russia) and the Turks (in Anatolia) shifted the definition to a more spiritual one: Europe came to be identified with Christendom – specifically, western Christendom.



In this definition, Europe ended where Turkey began, even when Turkey extended deep into the continent proper. When the Turks controlled large parts of the Balkans, those areas were considered to be beyond Europe [8], the eastern edge of which was the border between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires.

To be fair, this viewpoint wasn't absolute. As their power declined, the Ottomans were pushed out of almost all of Europe. This allowed the classical definition to prevail, placing the border at the narrow waterway that connects the Mediterranean and Black Seas [9]. It remains there to this day – with only Turkish Thrace remaining as a reminder that "Europe" may stop where continents divide, but also where empires collide.

The northern border with Asia posed a different problem for geographers because, as knowledge of and self-consciousness in that part of the world increased, it turned out that "Europe" was not connected to Asia via a narrow isthmus, but rather via the widening expanse of Russia. The problem being that any definition of Europe will divide Russia in two. The question is thus: How much of Russia is European? Or, even: How European is Russia?

As seen from the west, the earliest answer always seemed to be, not much, or not at all. The French minister Sully (1560-1641), when dreaming up his “Grand Design” [10] for a “Very Christian Council of Europe,” objected to Russia’s inclusion in his scheme: “[T]here scarce remains any conformity among us with them; besides they belong to Asia as much as to Europe. We may indeed almost consider them as a barbarous country, and place them in the same class with Turkey.” [11]

Sully’s opinion sounds awfully modern. For centuries, the urge was to include Moscow and its lands within the European continent, even though doing so made for some rather arbitrary-seeming distinctions. In the Renaissance, geographers solved the problem of Europe’s eastern border by being creative: Ortelius, in his “Theatrum Orbis Terrarum” (1570), started from the ancient border, the river Don (even though it was less impressive than its semi-mythical pendant, the Tanais), then drawing a straight line north towards the White Sea, near the city of Archangel.

By the end of the 17th century, the eastern border of Europe had shifted, following the courses of the rivers Don, Volga and Kama, and then leaping in a straight line across the northern Ural Mountains to join the river Ob north into the Arctic Ocean.

This border, championed by the geographer Philipp Clüver, made the Gulf of Ob, at 600 miles the world’s longest estuary, the border between Europe and Asia. Had this extension of Europe east of the Urals persisted, the northernmost part of Europe would now be the tip of the Yamal Peninsula [12], poking 400 miles into the Arctic and home to Russia’s largest remaining reindeer herds (and largest remaining natural gas reserves).



Those reindeer might have benefited from the media attention that being threatened in “Europe’s northernmost wilderness” might have brought. But alas for them: The Ob as Europe’s northeastern border became obsolete by the late 18th century.

The reason for this was the expansive growth of the Russian state east- and southward, so that geographers felt annoyed by the fact that Russia in its entirety could no longer be treated under the header “Europe.” One solution was to discard “Muscovy” entirely from Europe, another to extend the borders of Europe to keep up, somewhat, with Russian expansion. To be fair, the Russians themselves considered Europe to be elsewhere, hence the mission of St. Petersburg, founded in 1703, to be a “window on Europe.”



The ultimate compromise between “Russia in” and “Russia out” was found when western geographers became aware of the mountain range the Russians themselves called Kameny Poyas (“Stony Girdle”). The Swedish military geographer Philip Johan von Strahlenberg, after years of captivity gave him the benefit of close observation of the Russian geography, proposed these Ural Mountains as the new European border in 1730. The Strahlenberg border soon found acceptance throughout Europe – and Russia itself.

Strahlenberg’s southern bend back via the Volga to the Don (always the Don) was more controversial. Many geographers chose, where the Ural Mountains ended, to follow the Ural River south to the Caspian Sea.

By the early 19th century, Conrad Malte-Brun and other French geographers had successfully promoted the Caucasus Mountains, connecting the Caspian to the Black Sea, as the southern border of Europe.

This is still considered the most conventional border for the continent of Europe. But the Urals-Ural-Caspian-Caucasus border was (and is) by no means a generally accepted convention. Several geographers have, over the centuries, tried to place Europe’s eastern boundary well beyond the Urals – one notable example being the 18th-century German botanist Johann Georg Gmelin, who proposed the Yenisey River, running from the Mongolian border to the Arctic Ocean near the 70th meridian east, or about 2,000 miles east of Moscow.

The most expansive vision of Europe was one of many expounded by the founder of the Pan-European Union, the Austrian count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, in 1935. It solved the problem of finding an adequate geographical boundary to Europe by substituting a political one – all of the Soviet Union would be considered part of Europe. Asia would be to its south. That would have made European cities out of Vladivostok and Irkutsk, but also Samarkand and Dushanbe.

During the cold war, however, the opposite tendency triumphed more often: All of the Soviet Union, including Vilnius, Riga and other cities that today lie within the European Union, were excluded from Europe entirely. At times even the Soviet satellite states in the Warsaw Pact were left out as well, so much had “Europe” come to be synonymous with “the West” and its associated political values.

Today, of course, the border of Europe is rebounding, thanks to the expansive semi-state run out of Brussels. Indeed, if Turkey ever does join the E.U. – and while its prospects look dim today, who knows what a decade or two will bring – it will push the border of Europe further east than anyone but a few daydreaming geographers had ever imagined: from the volcanic shores of Iceland to the mountainous frontier that divides Turkey from Iran.

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[1] By signing the Treaty of Rome (1957), the three Benelux countries, Italy and – most crucially – the former archenemies France and (West) Germany constituted the European Economic Community, which would later become the European Union.

[2] That's a maximalist figure, including countries partly or wholly outside the accepted geographic borders of Europe, and thus often excluded: Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and one country well within most geographic definitions of Europe, but still not recognized by many as a sovereign state: Kosovo.

[3] Of the former Yugoslav countries, only tiny Slovenia has joined (in 2004). Albania, never a part of Yugoslavia, is also still in the E.U. antechamber.

[4] Only 10 mm per 10 cm. Otherwise an equal number of cucumbers wouldn't fit into standard packaging, which would require them to be counted individually. More background [here](#).

[5] The opposite being oceanic islands, which are often volcanic, like Hawaii.

[6] Currently better known as the Dardanelles, this narrow strait connects the Aegean Sea with the Sea of Marmara. It was a favorite fording place for the ancients. It is not to be confused with the Bosphorus, to the north at Istanbul, which connects the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea. Both so-called Turkish Straits separate Europe from Asia.

[7] Representing about 3 percent of Turkey's total area, and, as the location of historical Istanbul and its densely populated European hinterland, 12 percent of Turkey's total population.

[8] Hence, perhaps, the Balkan attitudes described above.

[9] Respectively called Akdeniz (White Sea) and Karadeniz (Black Sea) in Turkish, perhaps in accordance with the ancient, transcultural habit of associating colors and directions. See also Kizildeniz (Red Sea).

[10] A blueprint for a utopian European republic, seen by some as prefiguring the European Union.

[11] As quoted in "Europe: How Far?" by W.H. Parker, published in the Geographical Journal, Vol. 126 No. 3 (September 1960).

[12] In the local language, "Yamal" means "World's End."

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