MEANINGS OF INDEPENDENCE AND MANIFESTATIONS OF NEOLIBERAL NATIONALISM DURING THE 'REFUGEE CRISIS' IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

The Eastern European political and para-political responses to the 'refugee crisis' demonstrate a schism between the 'old' and the 'new Europe'. Hostile attitudes reveal how unresolved post-imperial pasts currently manifest themselves in a seeming inability to show solidarity and empathy for the human suffering of others. To address this question critically, I utilize the notion of 'independence' to disentangle the specific neoliberal political mentality that has developed in the Central and Eastern European region, along with a variety of ethno-nationalisms which relive their own past wounds. In countries which have wiped away almost all reminders of their socialist past, solidarity and collectivity are not widely subscribed-to values. Apart from the immediate need to act alongside other European countries and help to accommodate current refugee flows, the Eastern Bloc has a long and necessary journey ahead. This is to negotiate and address their own social and cultural pluralities, which have been deliberately ignored in the rush to join the club of the worlds' wealthiest democracies in the EU. During this formally accelerated political process, insufficient attention has been paid to social transformations in these new EU countries, including their reluctance to take in and accommodate new migrants and refugees.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, post-socialism, neoliberalism, nationalism, refugee 'crisis', independence

Los significados de la independencia y las manifestaciones de nacionalismo neoliberal durante la "crisis de refugiados" en Europa Central y Oriental

Resumen

Las respuestas políticas y para-políticas de Europa Oriental a la "crisis de refugiados" demuestran una escisión entre la "vieja" y la "nueva" Europa. Actitudes hostiles revelan cómo los pasados post-imperiales no resueltos se manifiestan en una aparente incapacidad de mostrar su solidaridad y empatía por el sufrimiento humano de los demás. Para abordar esta cuestión críticamente, utilizo la noción de "independencia" para desenredar la mentalidad política neoliberal específica que se ha desarrollado en la región de Europa Central

y Oriental, junto con una variedad de etno-nacionalismos que reviven sus propias heridas del pasado. En países que han borrado casi todos los recuerdos de su pasado socialista, la solidaridad y la colectividad no son valores ampliamente reconocidos. Aparte de la necesidad inmediata de actuar junto con otros países europeos y a ayudar a adaptarse a los flujos de refugiados actuales, el bloque del Este tiene un viaje largo y necesario por delante. Este se trata de negociar y atender sus propias pluralidades sociales y culturales, que han sido ignoradas deliberadamente en la prisa por unirse al club de las democracias más ricas de los mundos de la UE. Durante este proceso político formalmente acelerado, no se ha prestado suficiente atención a las transformaciones sociales en estos nuevos países de la UE, incluyendo su renuencia a tomar y dar cabida a los nuevos migrantes y refugiados.

Palabras clave: Europa Central y Oriental, post-socialismo, neoliberalismo, nacionalismo, "crisis" de refugiados, independencia

Introduction

> There is a divide … between the east and the west of the EU. Some member states are thinking about containing the wave of migration symbolised by the Hungarian [border] fence (Donald Tusk, the EU Council's President, quoted in Graham-Harrison *et al*. 2015).

The above quote is just one of many possible examples which reveal how the media have started to mobilize a discourse on the Eastern Bloc's alleged unwillingness to demonstrate solidarity to refugees, alongside warnings of a deeper 'European crisis' that stems from Europe's cultural and political divisions. Media debates have continuously tried to pin down the most salient dimensions on which this 'crisis' is founded. Central and Eastern European (CEE) political leaders from countries like Poland and Hungary complain that the EU 'dictates' what other countries should do; the Slovakian prime minister insisted that his country, 'where there is not a single Muslim mosque', would extend its support only to a tiny number of Christians, while Hungarian government leaders have reportedly portrayed asylum-seekers as 'illegal immigrants' marching over the Hungarian border (Lyman 2015). Media editorials and news stories quickly developed further analysis on far-right and nationalist politics, questioning the accelerated transition from socialism to capitalism and other 'evidence of the stubborn cultural and political divides that persist between East and West' (Lyman 2015). Feature articles flourished across Europe and globally during 2015 and 2016, in an effort to understand and unpack for a general readership why Central and Eastern European political discourses were so pointedly mobilized against asylum-seekers, quite unlike the experiences of solidarity and compassion that many thousands of people from CEE countries had received when they were escaping oppressive Communist regimes during and after the Second World War.

Central and Eastern Europe: the media scene

In this reflective paper on responses to the 'refugee crisis' in Central and Eastern Europe I use media reports to illustrate interpretations and imaginations, where different political, expert and 'ordinary' voices meet and various genres are played out (Jones and Fowler 2007). The media not only and not necessarily mimics reality but, rather, shapes and creates it through discursive practices of signification. Discourses both represent and create mental maps of the 'world' (Barnes and Duncan 1992: 5–6) and also signify 'deeper layers' of ideas that may not always be directly spelled out in words (Lull 1995).

What *was* explicitly spelled out and contested by both 'Western' and 'Central and Eastern' actors was the scope and numbers of asylum-seekers in 2015. Mainly originating from Syria but also from elsewhere in the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa, these asylum-seekers exceeded the scale of asylum flows during the Second World War, with an estimate of 350,000–450,000 in 2015 (EUROSTAT 2015: 2). However, in a global context, Europe is taking care of only a small proportion of asylum-seekers and refugees world-wide. CEE countries – according to the European Commission's relocation plan – were responsible for just a tiny fraction of the 120,000

refugees who needed to be relocated throughout the EU.[1] Due to the small numbers, it would not be correct to label these asylum-seeker flows as a 'refugee crisis'. It is, indeed, more a crisis of EU bureaucracy and its asylum system. In relation to fierce, even hate-filled responses on the part of many of Europe's countries, especially Central and Eastern European countries, we should instead talk of the 'European crisis', which will be an implicit thread throughout this paper.

Moreover, what was ubiquitously spelled out emotionally was the 'Western' and global suspicion that CEE countries and their people were unable and unwilling to show compassion for human suffering. As Latvian anthropologist Dace Dzenovska has rightly pointed out in her essay on responses in Latvia, it is hardly surprising that Eastern Europeans could be less capable of compassion than Westerners. As she observes:

> the difference seems to lie in the fact that they [Eastern Europeans] either do not use the sentiment of compassion as a basis for politics or limit its application to a particular nation, race or religion (Dzenovska 2016: 5).

More importantly, she urges us to think about 'politics as ethics' and 'concrete forms of political futures' in an age of migration and increasingly more numerous diasporic formations throughout Europe (2016: 11).

The media is an ideological process: it holds power, mediates, produces and re-produces ideology through the perceived importance of selected themes (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 2000). Deeper layers in this 'European crisis', in my reading of it, are related to the national and regional identities and global positioning of CEE countries, where symbolic meanings are produced through the interplay of knowledge and the intentions of particular actors (Werlen 2005: 52–53). More concretely, I propose in this paper to look at Central and Eastern Europe and at discourses mobilized around the 'refugee' and 'European' crises through the thus-far-overlooked notion of 'independence', as recently advanced by Anssi Paasi (2015). I argue that it is the very idea and ideal of independence that are latently and also overtly signified in discourses that are mobilized in CEE. Growing up myself in the Soviet Union, witnessing events that led to the re-establishment of Latvia's independence in the early 1990s and accession to the EU in 2004, the very trope of 'independence' was the most important ideal, a meta-narrative that solidified political discourses and was embedded in everyday life. The independence idea is a multifaceted ideal that can be summarized around the domains of geo-history, economy and culture: a country being independent from an invader and having its own collective agency that is enjoyed within a bounded territory but is also articulated internationally in a dignified and recognized way; becoming prosperous through its own work on its own territory; and creating an idealized type of independent, 'patriotic' citizen who embodies the fruits of the state's 'independence'. Not surprisingly, this notion of independence has been mobilized to a much lesser extent in the older democracies of Europe; however, there, too, as in the UK, the independence discourse has recently been used more frequently and in relation to the so-called refugee crisis.

In the following sections I illustrate three dimensions through which I propose to better understand the responses and outcomes in CEE in relation to (1) historical re-bordering processes, (2) resistance to unequal decision-making in the EU and (3) the creation of idealized citizens of independent states against the backdrop of specific manifestations of neoliberal ethno-nationalism in CEE. These three dimensions will be illustrated by reference to selected English-language media output (published in 2015–2016) which debates CEE responses to the 'refugee crisis'. Finally, I provide conclusions on the usefulness

1 According to the European Commission's proposal of 22 September 2015 – Annex 'European schemes for relocation and resettlement' – EU countries would need to relocate in total 120,000 asylum-seekers and distribute them according to size of the population, the GDP and the unemployment rate in the individual member-states. Compulsory redistribution sets the following quotas for CEE countries: Bulgaria 2,172; Croatia 1,811; Czech Republic 4,306; Estonia 1,111; Hungary 827 (considerably less than it should be according to the redistribution criteria, due to fierce opposition from the Hungarian government); Latvia 1,043; Lithuania 1,283; Poland 11,946; Romania 6,351; Slovakia 2,287 and Slovenia 1,126 (EC 2015).

of the notion of independence for future research. I now take a closer look at the notion of 'independence' itself.

Independence: from 'banal' celebration to 'hot' warnings

'We are what we celebrate' is one of the most concise and famous identity 'diagnoses' established by Etzioni and Bloom (2004) in their study on how national identity is embedded through rituals and holidays. As Paasi (2015) has observed, many Central and Eastern European countries widely celebrate a special 'Independence Day' – an annual and quintessentially 'banal' (Billig 1995) event of nationalism – whereas the so-called Western European countries and old democracies instead celebrate specific events, related either to nation-building or to particular people, but not to independence as such. In essence, the importance of independence is usually celebrated by states that have established their freedom from former colonial and imperial powers and military occupations. Paasi, to my knowledge, is the first prominent geographer to bring to light the absence of any theorization of this important notion. Although geographers have long analyzed the fundamental concepts of sovereignty and national identity (Paasi 2015; cf. Agnew 2009; Knight 1982; Mellor 1989), the notion of independence is worthy of being distinguished from the concept of sovereignty.

First, the idea of independence is a victory for justice, the collective throwing off of the chains of an oppressor and exploiter (both military and economic) and the regaining of a full political and cultural 'voice'. It is more closely related to post-colonial and post-imperial contexts whereby states and people 'won' their independence from former aggressors.[2] Second, independence is instead envisaged as a result of 'hot' nationalism – war, violence, anger and battle; it was won some time in the past, often – but not always – through bloodshed, death and suffering. The question of how nationalism is maintained once independence has been established needs to be brought to the fore in order to deepen our understanding of the process of independence. Paasi argues that independence is a crucial ideological medium where 'hot' and 'banal' forms of nationalism are routinized and mobilized in everyday life and during significant events such as crises or celebrations. Furthermore, he warns that

> hot elements (of nationalism) do not lie buried in history, lurking innocently in the background behind banal nationalism, but are embedded within it, thus injecting a critical emotional fuel into banal nationalism (Paasi 2015).

Moreover, the 'hot' and 'banal' interplay in the independence idea plays out prominently in relation to how relatively small-scale numbers of asylum-seekers have succeeded in creating salient 'panic' in the media. Despite drawing on the somewhat crude binaries of the boundedness of the nation-state and the openness of globalization, Appadurai (2006) provides a thought-provoking argument in relation to the current situation with asylum-seekers and CEE responses. A fear of small numbers seems to reject the ideological failure of a nation-state, and violence is one way to respond to uncertainties that create new, more-certain discourses in promoting nationalisms (Appadurai 2006; Morley and Robins 1995). Lastly, and in relation to the 'crisis' trope, the specific neoliberal political mentality should not be overlooked. As Jamie Peck (2011) has reminded us, neoliberal ideologies will not collapse due to crises, be they financial, economic or of national identity. On the contrary, they strive and, like zombies, 'feast' on the various crises.

Independence as imperial past

In his influential book on Eastern European historiographies, Larry Wolff (1994) argues that Eastern Europe is a region that has been invented and discovered by Western philosophers, political scientists and historians as Europe's own shadow within the continent. In his words, Western civilization 'discovered its complement, within the same continent, in

2 One example here is the so-called Singing Revolution in the Baltic States, which claimed that they regained their independence from the Soviet Union peacefully, by mobilizing the ethno-national strength in choral singing, which culminated in hundreds of thousands of singers in Song Festivals.

shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism' (Wolff 1994: 4). The invention of Eastern Europe could only be 'an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization' and has become the West's 'first model of underdevelopment' (1994: 7–9). Other authors continuously remind us of the political, economic and social orientalization of Eastern Europe. Diverse countries and social histories can be packed together and rearranged differently under a guiding generalizing label of 'Eastern Europeans' that carries negative shading, related to 'backwardness' and the need to 'catch up' with the 'advanced' West as the 'normal case' (Herrschel 2007: 34).

For all that, Central and Eastern Europe is a rich and diverse region of political thought and histories of oppression, wars and shifting imperial powers, stretching from Estonia to Albania. What is a necessary requirement to get beyond the surface representations of CEE during the 'refugee crisis' is to shift the taken-for-granted reference point away from the purely Western European optic and towards cross-European histories which do not overlook but which interconnect to the intellectual heritage of Central and Eastern Europe (Trencsényi *et al*. 2016: 1). One such interconnection is the imperial, entwined pasts and powers stemming from the current Central European countries themselves.

'Glorious' references to an imperial past are not new in CEE. On the contrary, they are routinely used to rejuvenate the independence idea as a symbolical source of power. As Fowkes (1999: 1–2) emphasized, the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians in particular dislike being crudely packed together as 'Eastern Europe'. Inevitably, these past-oriented remarks also manifested themselves during the 'refugee crisis'. The most scandalous were hard-line Hungarian President Viktor Orbán's comments, with his 'references to century-old wars with the Ottomans' being seen as ludicrous and disgraceful by the West (*Guardian* Editorial 2015). In media debates, too, political leaders of Central European countries continuously emphasized their unity as 'The Visegrad Group', with the common aim of influencing their European integration and regional cooperation (Dangerfield 2009). The origins of the name 'Visegrad' date back to the fourteenth-century collaboration between Bohemian, Hungarian and Polish imperial powers. The group has continuously expressed views opposing the Brussels plans for the distribution of refugee quotas without explicit consultations with independent states, and stated its readiness to pursue more 'hot' actions of tightening border controls to limit migrant flows (Paterson 2016).

We can find similar emphasis on a 'glorious past' across the Baltics, too. For Lithuania, the fact that, during the Middle Ages, the country was one of the biggest on the European map, serves as a source of symbolic empowerment in the national memory, especially nowadays when, in the whole country, there are only 3 million people, a figure continuously eroded by post-independence emigration. Another historical aspect is Lithuania's relations with Poland. In the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, these two countries formed a union and had one governing system (Purs 2012). On a different tack, in Estonia the stress on a Finno-Ugric inheritance is particularly strong. This is part of attempts to remap Estonia as heir to the Hanseatic League of Baltic maritime trade between prosperous European city regions from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Currently Estonia presents itself as a Nordic, not an Eastern European country, through both its emphasis on a rational cultural mentality and its relative economic prosperity (Piirimäe 2012).

The danger of flirting with imperial pasts is related to the justification of current authoritarian regimes and the de-humanizing of refugees as a basis for maintaining the independence idea. Again, the Hungarian leader Orbán, together with the Slovakian Prime Minister Fico, have been blaming the 'West' for the refugee crisis, as it was the Western powers which bombed the independent states of Syria and Libya (Traynor 2015a). The very idea of national independence was exploited by Orbán in order to amend laws that allow the use of 'non-lethal' force against asylum-seekers. These legal changes were prepared with his 'hot' self-endorsement because asylum-seekers, for him, 'look like an army' (AFP 2015). Lastly, CEE historians and political philosophers emphasize at least one additional fundamental

difference with Central and Eastern Europe. The regions' intellectual thought and heritage, as distinct from those of Western Europe and Russia, are seen as more pronounced in the context of their 'collective "existential" threat of disappearance' (Trencsényi *et al.* 2016: 12).[3] 'Ottoman wars' and a long history of glory and of being, themselves, an oppressive power can be mobilized as necessary elements in the maintainance of the independence idea by far-right nationalists. In Gilroy's (2015) interpretation, one result of the failure to address painful histories of imperial power in many countries has further translated into other crises of identity and ethno-nationality.

Independence as decision-making

Unequal power relations within the EU are the second important dimension where anger, rejection and resistance are used to demonstrate ideals of independence by CEE political leaders. The media continuously reported that East Europeans rejected the EU's attempt to set refugee quotas. The government of the Czech Republic, for instance, argued that such quotas are illegal and the Hungarian government, as already noted, even hastily introduced laws to use force against asylum-seekers crossing the state's independent borders (Traynor 2015b). These reactions were vocally angry, fierce responses designed to nurture the independence idea, and aimed at national communities back home. Discourses on strengthening and fencing national borders were very directly related to the idea of independence: after Hungary sealed its borders, asylum-seekers changed route and entered the EU via Slovenia (more than 100,000 people in two weeks); about 200,000 also crossed Croatia's border (Graham-Harrison 2015a), causing flare-ups of threatening language against national security in these countries, too.

However, the question of democratic decision-making in the EU – where CEE countries may feel excluded from the central power axis and therefore see themselves as victims of power asymmetries – is more complex. By simultaneously joining the EU and adopting EU legislation, CEE countries also had to adjust to the idea that they would transform from emigration countries into countries of immigration (Lavenex 1999). Similarly, they had to agree on democratic responses to ethnic minorities residing on their territories before internal reconciliation and democratic dialogue could be achieved. To build a democracy, solidarity and cooperation requires time in order to create a more inclusive, future-oriented memory, where each country's own imperial and oppressive past has been openly communicated; however, the Europeanization process was necessarily accelerated in these countries (Gingrich 2006: 199; Ochmann 2015: 221). Little time and intellectual resources were allocated in the 1990s to the rethinking of and communication about other possible or imaginative geopolitical configurations as alternatives to joining the EU. Thus, for instance, in the mid-1990s all three Baltic States rushed to launch their journeys towards EU membership. As Herrschel put it: 'They [Baltic States] saw effectively no other choice than "Moscow or Brussels" for their future statehood' (2007: 56).

The argument that they lacked both the time and the experience to embrace new immigrants was ubiquitously exploited by both politicians and the intelligentsia in these countries. For instance, see how intellectuals from CEE, in their open letter to the world and to leaders of their countries, appeal to the timing argument:

> Unlike the former colonial and imperial powers that took in large numbers of immigrants after the Second World War, we have little experience of coexisting with people of different cultures, from far-off lands. (...) In refusing to help, we deny the idea of European solidarity. Furthermore, we undermine the solidarity that other nations have shown towards our countries. That would erode the foundations on which, for the past 25 years, we have been building our security, our prospects

3 There are numerous and world-famous examples of CEE art, performances, paintings, and novels solidifying this ontological insecurity. A token example would be Kundera's (1999) novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where, in defiance of an oppressive regime, the interplay of intimate, 'banal' and 'hot nationalism' in striving for the country's own version of independence and prosperity during the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 is played out.

> for development and our hope of escaping the historical tribulations of war, foreign rule, and poverty (EuroAktiv 2015).

However, CEE countries are not just passively-aggressively reacting to unequal decision-making in the EU; Orbán even positioned himself as the defender of the entire EU by saying that 'he would not let Europeans become a minority on their own continent' (Graham-Harrison 2015b).

Eastern Europe as a concept has never achieved stability (Wolff 1994). On the contrary, this denomination of an invented region is repeatedly used by the 'West' due to its instability, its arbitrary shifting geography and its social characteristics, and can be used as a discursive tool to set these countries apart, or even abandon them, as had already happened before the Second World War (Wolff 1994: 143). Nevertheless, what we saw during the 'refugee crisis' was not so much a fear of being abandoned by the rest of the EU but, rather, CEE countries exercising new ways of independent expression in EU decision-making processes. On the one hand, CEE political leaders could conveniently portray their states as victims of asymmetrically powerful states within the EU (Winter 2011) but, on the other, they could insist on the power of the bounded independence idea as more appealing and as more powerful than solidarity.

Independence as favoring a neoliberal 'patriot'

The third dimension of the fundamental idea of independence is that of prosperity. Due to the relatively less-developed economies in CEE, this dimension may seem less important than it actually is for the independence idea. It manifests as specific forms of ethno-national neoliberalism, with an 'emphasis on [individual] choice, self-reliance and fairness at the expense of equality, mutuality and rights, which has had a destructive impact on the ability to imagine national solidarity and collectivity' (Gilroy 2015: 233). Consider Viktor Orbán's argumentation for a 'hot' [power and violence] prerogative in defence of the prosperity enabled by independence:

> If you are rich and attractive to others, you also have to be strong because if not, they [migrants] will take away what you have worked for and you will be poor, too (Graham-Harrison 2015b).

It is possible to apply a universal code to the world of difference without violence (Harvey 2015), not that any such code could be imposed on CEE. It is a diverse region in terms of economic inequalities – as expressed in the Gini Index,[4] which measures the income gap between individuals. Actually, Central European countries are demonstrating more income equality than some Western EU countries – especially the Czech Republic, with its Gini coefficient of 25.1, Hungary at 27.9, Slovakia, 26.1 and Slovenia, 25.0. In Poland, inequality is higher, at 30.8 points in 2014 (Eurostat 2016). In the Baltic States, inequality is even more pronounced, with the following indexes: Estonia 35.6, Latvia 35.5 and Lithuania 35.0. Similarly, Bulgaria (35.4) and Romania (34.7), the poorest EU member-states, also feature high inequality levels.

Yet the ideal of prosperity as a right for the deserving citizens of an independent state becomes salient in a continuous emphasis that there are no (literal) places where asylum-seekers and refugees can be housed – most properties are privately owned. This is a specific outcome of what Gilroy (2015: 233) calls a modernized citizenship outside the welfare state. An idealized, 'patriotic' modernized citizen in the EU newcomer countries relies only on him/herself and does not expect the state to provide help and support during economic hardship. Although a large segment of the population in those CEE countries with pronounced inequalities does suffer from poverty, their voices are effectively silenced (Balockaite 2009). Those who are and have become poor, due to neoliberal transformations in these countries and accentuated by the economic crisis, do not fit the idealized figure of a citizen who deserves and rejoices in independence. For instance, in one of the most unequal EU countries, Latvia, the social benefits for refugees with

4 The Gini Index or Coefficient measures inequality in societies. It takes into account poverty, income distribution levels and the living conditions of all people in a country. The higher the index, the more unequal is the society.

a confirmed status of entitlement to protection were reduced from 256 to 139 euros per month in late 2015. Notwithstanding that, on such a low income, it is very hard to survive at all, the national and green parties ironically argued that such low levels of support would place refugees on a more equal footing with local people (Latvian Farmers' Union 2015). Even though the hypocrisy is so obvious in such statements against the inequalities in the country and also against the median income (with the average monthly wage at around 800 euros per month and the average old-age pension 280 euros), it is the unfairness to the 'other' that silences pathological injustices in local populations. Independence, as worth more than decent economic survival, has long been cultivated in Latvia, when one of the most powerful organizing independence slogans in the late 1980s and early 1990s was 'even if in *pastalas* [peasant slippers], but in a free Latvia'.

The 'silenced poor' in CEE countries, among those who have managed to obtain their wealth through neoliberal values, are mobilized through the related discourse of patriotism as a mental stance against ethnically different 'others'. For instance, when dealing with the past, and the holocaust especially, 'If Poland wanted to be a legitimate member of the European family, it had to promote itself as a country that was progressive, modern and committed to human rights' (Ochmann 2015: 222). If, previously, the 'others' were always within – former Soviet citizens in the Baltic States, and the Roma in Hungary, Slovakia or Poland – the 'refugee crisis' was exploited to mobilize a discourse on how the internal 'others' – ethnically, socially and economically – could relate to discourses of an outer 'other' – ethnically and racially different, poor and in need of support.

In such a way, the 'banal' patriotism for the independence of a person's own country was fueled by hard-line 'hot' stances of keeping the 'others' out, if necessary by force. By failing to address the struggles that the populations of these countries face if they are to survive economically and gain dignity, the inward-looking forms of independence automatically perceive refugees as a burden.

Conclusion

In this paper I have used the notion of independence in order to create a more fertile terrain on which we can understand the anger and hate-filled reactions that spread across Central and Eastern Europe with respect to the 'refugee crisis'. I have argued that it is important to unpack the economic and social divisions that underlie processes within which the idea of independence is maintained.

I have also argued that such an approach can help us to go beyond the praxis of treating Eastern Europe as merely a 'shadow' of the European continent, with its long history of democracy and prosperity. First, through the lens of independence, we can see how CEE countries instrumentalize the 'hot' independence idea against the dangerous 'outside' through reference to centuries-long wars, imperial rule and prosperous trade leagues. The dangers here lie in the fact that these historical memories of power and prosperity are employed to remind the rest of the world of the possibility of violence and 'hot' action in the name of today's independence.

Second, through focusing on angry reactions to EU decision-making, we can trace the diverse mobilization of independence discourses. The invented concept of 'Eastern Europe' thrives on the instability of the very concept, which enables manœuvring between the discourses of poor and inexperienced countries that have the right to reject 'refugees', to the prophetic fueling of far-right righteousness in the name of independence.

Responding to Dzenovska's (2016) plea to think in concrete political terms of how the countries of 'Eastern Europe' could build their near futures out of the current crisis, one such form, possibly, would be 'cosmopolitics' (Harvey 2015; Ochmann 2015). This would require the recognition of uneasy and uncomfortable differences and inequalities both in the distant past and in contemporary power settings. Furthermore, cosmopolitics would require dialogue, and going beyond current blame discourses of backward and authoritarianism-preferring 'East' versus 'normal' West. As Ochmann puts it:

> Employment of historical memory for cosmopolitan projects seems to be successful only in specific settings. It is through daily interactions and a joint tackling of common present-day problems and shared pain that cosmopolitan practices arise. [If we] search for 'what we have in common and not what divides us', it is translated into meaningful action (2015: 230).

It would also require 're-writing fascism's history on a cosmopolitan scale' (Gilroy 2015: 236) in order to develop multi-connected memories and futures through communication, but not through insistence on a consensus about the past (Ochmann 2015: 224–225). For the 'West', it requires a more appreciative recognition of the history, intellectual realm, demography, tradition and memory of their own 'others' – Central and Eastern Europe, with its recurrent existential threats and fears of losing its independence (Trencsényi *et al*. 2016).

Furthermore, since 'survival migration' seems to have become one of the defining long-term challenges of the twenty-first century (Betts 2013), the independence of Central and Eastern European states through economic forms of nationalism, including more extreme manifestations of neoliberal nationalism, cannot be overlooked. When economic and financial dependencies globally, as well as CEE's own poor, ethnicized and racialized 'others', are placed in the meta-narrative of the values of independence, the huge leap forwards can be envisaged. Simultaneously it would also be a step away from blinding anger against imagined others and towards policies that enable refugees to make a contribution to national and transnational economies, cultures and communities. When it comes to the local population, the peasant slippers (*pastalas*) – as the only token of independence – are drying out of their mobilizing power in countries where people have long been silenced and made to feel guilty for their poverty and where millions have earned economically more dignified lives through emigration. Thus, a quest for a more social-democratic dialogue in Central and Eastern Europe also needs to be put on the agenda.

Last but not least, the whole of Europe, too, is an idea, a construct that is continuously reviewed in relation to dangerous forms of nationalism and *ad hoc* assemblages of anti-immigrant sentiment (Morley and Robins 1995: 58; Paasi 2015). Consider this, for instance – in anticipation of Britain's forthcoming referendum on exit from the EU, now scheduled for June 2016, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán said that a British 'No' vote [i.e. willingness to leave the EU] would be 'in favour of Hungary's independence' (Cendrowicz 2016). With far-right governments increasingly raising their profiles during times of recession and crisis across Europe, this further and uneasy deeper probing into the ideals of independence that are held so dear by millions of ordinary people may help researchers to provide more-nuanced responses to the rise of current nationalisms and their interplay with 'hot' forms of action in defence of independence, alongside the use of violence and the expulsion of 'others'.

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