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ESSAYS

The EU polycrisis and hard populism in East-Central Europe: From the Copenhagen dilemma to the Juncker paradox

ATTILA ÁGH



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Abstract: *Analyses of populism in East-Central Europe (ECE) necessarily depart from the general crisis of representative democracy in the EU and describe the ECE as a specific regional case reflecting the failure of the catch-up process. The first part of this article adopts this “classical” approach and considers the backsliding of ECE democracy alongside the rise of populist identity politics in the global context. In the second part, I turn to the historical trajectory of ECE populism as a “nested” or two-level game in the EU context of ECE developments. The third part of this article outlines the main contradictions in this process that has led to what I call the Juncker paradox. To understand this paradox, we need to return to what the Commission noted in the early 2010s as the Copenhagen dilemma: after the EU accession of ECE states, the EU had no means to control rule-of-law violations and, in fact, supported autocratic populist ECE regimes through European transfers. This article explains the worsening of this situation in the late 2010s as the EU polycrisis caused Juncker’s Commission to focus on Core-based priorities and marginalise rule-of-law violations in ECE. This inaction and neglect have produced a special case of negative externalities – the Juncker paradox – that has largely been counterproductive and further strengthened anti-EU populism in all ECE countries, especially Hungary and Poland. Despite this situation, I conclude that Juncker’s 2017 State of the Union address should be a turning point in the EU’s policy towards ECE; in particular, it should promote a better understanding of the regional situation and more effective enforcement of the rule of law.*

Key words: *East-Central Europe, polycrisis, EU*

Rethinking the “classical” approach: The contamination of identity politics in ECE

In the last quarter century, an empty representative democracy has emerged in East-Central Europe with democracy reduced to mere electoral democracy as populations grow alienated from elected parties and politicians, a trend evidenced in the reports of major reviewers (BF 2016, 2017; FH 2017; WEF 2017a, b, c). Initially this situation led to the soft populism of the first party system and later – after critical elections – to the hard populism of the second party system (see, e.g., Haughton – Degan-Krause 2015; Havlik – Voda 2016). Soft populism had a basically domestic orientation, focusing on “internal enemies” while hard populism has found its main enemy in the EU, a target that leads me to call it “Eupopulism”. This article deals first with the decline of representative democracy in EU states, a process I consider mostly from the point of view of ECE domestic developments. I then analyse the EU context as a nested game, taking into account both the neglect of the new member states during the EU’s management of the global crisis and the re-nationalisation of politics in ECE where abuse of the “Brussels demon” has helped consolidate populist regimes. While the rollback of Europeanisation and decline of democracy have mostly been domestically induced processes in ECE, the EU’s negative externalities have also played an important role. EU membership has meant a demand for compliance with EU rules and values, however the EU has not elaborated any enforcement mechanism to deal with non-compliance in ECE. The lack of proper mechanisms to address the systemic failures of Europeanisation and democratisation has largely encouraged populist regimes.¹

More generally, identity politics has swept across the world since the global crisis, making itself felt primarily in the most developed countries but also having a powerful contaminating effect in ECE. Since the mid-2010s, the erosion of European identity – reinforced by the Brexit decision and the US election of Donald Trump – has emerged as one of the most fashionable topics in European Studies (Engesser – Fawzi – Larsson 2017). While the Euro-crisis has to some extent been overcome economically, it has deepened into a social and even more clearly a “cultural” and “national” identity crisis. As populist parties grow stronger, identity politics has been the main driver of collective action for marginalised populations. The conditions behind this “new” wave of populism have only been worsened by the current geopolitical crisis. In look-

¹ I have dealt with the current eruption of populism in other recent publications (Ágh 2016a-d). This article offers only an outline of the socio-economic and cultural deficits and the distinction between external and internal Europeanisation that I have discussed in previous articles. My focus here is on the historical trajectory of Eupopulism, and thus, I broadly describe Hungarian developments with some reference to Poland. Although there are striking similarities across the new member states in the new populist wave, I concentrate here on the ECE countries.

ing for reasons for the sudden rise of populism in the EU, we may note two preparatory processes: the socio-economic crisis and growing inequality and “societal frustration” (Klipcerova-Baker – Kostál 2017) on the one hand, and an underlying cultural-political crisis leading to the erosion and re-nationalisation of European identity on the other. These two processes in the EU have been accelerated and reinforced at a political level by Brexit as a direct concern for the EU28 as well as by Trump’s election.

The sudden turn to identity politics has primarily been facilitated by the global cultural processes of the information age. We have, thus, seen a seeming eruption of populism in a very short time via global information networks. The global rise of populism (Moffitt 2016) can be attributed to new media technologies since media now pervades political life; this is also why the new populism has spread so rapidly around the world. Emerging from its earlier iterations to convey the new message of identity politics, populism has increasingly been embedded in a fast-shifting media communications landscape. What is novel here is the reliance on new media technologies and on shifting modes of political representation and identification across a great variety of political and cultural contexts. In a recent book, Moffitt (2016) attempts to locate populism within the global media landscape in an era of “communicative abundance”, noting the increasing affordability of communication technologies and the widening scope and growing speed of communication and information networks. In this new age of increased mediatisation, ECE populist leaders have also learned to use new media technologies to their advantage. Moffitt’s account, thus, offers a global media-centred understanding of contemporary populism that focuses on changing media and the mediatisation of politics. In this context, politics is increasingly being reshaped and altered as the influence of globalised media grows.²

The populist eruption has also meant an eruption of identity politics for the various groups who are looking for points of identification and representation through the still unmastered and rather chaotic digital communication of this media Babel. Identity politics is not new to the recent populism, and the history of the EU has always been attended by debates on European identity. This issue has been discussed in relation to EU citizenship and the EU’s popular legitimacy as well as in relation to the different levels of local, national and regional identity. The new approach distinguishes between two conceptually separate components of identity: the civic and the cultural. The *civic* pillar reflects a citizen’s identification with a political system and the rights and du-

2 In addressing cultural globalisation, Moffitt claims to move beyond purely regional approaches to populism, which he describes as a form of “academic ghettoization”. Nevertheless, the specific regional forms of populism demand study since these regional waves and varieties of populism are very different. Moffitt’s own work demonstrates that even in this era of mediatised global populism, there is some divergence in the “mega-regional” varieties of populism, most critically between Europe and the United States.

ties it confers on him/her as a political being. In contrast, the *cultural* pillar speaks to the citizen's sense of belonging to a human community where there is a common culture, social similarities and values or even a common ethnicity (Bruter 2008: 279). Merler (2017a, b) has recently summarised the debate on the relations between European identity and the protracted economic crisis by pointing out the tensions between pan-European elite identity (Eurocracy) and a deeper sense of common citizenship across the EU. She warns that civic identity has been eroded during the economic crisis and notes that recovery has been described as the “[r]ebuilding [of] economic and political capital for EU integration” (2017a, b) since legal fetishism has done serious damage to European identity. (For more on these themes, see below.)

This split between elite and citizen types of EU identity has disrupted the previous Europeanisation of national identities into “dual” (national and EU) components to such an extent that some analysts have condemned the “post-national dream” of European identity (Duchesne 2014). To begin with, the current EU identity crisis has challenged the global status of the EU. Second, it has highlighted the divorce between the technocratic and democratic EU, and third, it has compounded the tensions between so-called Core and Periphery identities. Moreover, in the countries most seriously hit by the global crisis, national identities have been reinforced while EU identifications have declined dramatically. The debate is ongoing given the apparent eruption in the 2010s of a wide variety of identities both globally and regionally, including in ECE. In sum, identity politics has played a central role in the new wave of populism, and this is contrasted with growing emptiness of representative democracy. As Ehala (2017) observes: “In the contemporary world, we are obsessed with identity. [...] Thus, identity issues have become contentious in the modern world, yet our understanding of identity is a mess” (p. 1).³

Identity politics has turned out to be the flagship for populist politics on both the left and the right as well as for all kinds of ethnicities and cultural groups. It has, moreover, been discussed and analysed by politicians, citizens and experts across several disciplines. This situation has been a great push for social constructivist approaches in the social sciences since collective identities are social constructed (Ehala 2017: 3–9). What Ehala calls the “sign system of collective identities” changes as civilisation evolves and explosive advances of information technology radically alter communication. At the same time, we find that as a major ideology shaping inter-group relations, “liberal” multicul-

3 The European identity crisis first came to a head in the mid-2000s after the failure of the European Constitution, resulting in a large body of literature on this topic. In particular, the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* published a special issue in 2008 featuring a lead paper by Bruter. My own book, *Eastern Enlargement and the Future of the EU27* (Budapest: Together for Europe Foundation, 2006, 237–288) includes a chapter devoted to the “identity crisis in the enlarged EU” which discusses both “cultural politics” and “civic democracy” from the standpoint of soft populism.

turalism now reveals an internal conceptual paradox since the eruption of a wide array of ever-changing identities has challenged the “liberal” system itself. This is clear both from newly emerging intolerant minority ideologies and from the challenged cultural majority that is behind nascent hard forms of populism. Furthermore, the eruption of collective identities from all directions has led to the erosion of social capital even in developed and consolidated democracies.

Against this backdrop of recent conceptual turmoil in discussions of the new populism and its identity politics, Buti and Pichelmann (2017) attempt to provide a systemic overview of what they call European integration and populism. Their analysis begins with a strong charge: EU institutions and policy settings are prone to populist attacks from both a purely economic and more cultural “nativist identity” angle since these institutions neglect the real problems of the EU population. Current competencies, mostly confined to the organising of markets and not extending to the question of distribution effects, make the EU appear like an agent of globalisation within Europe rather than the means for a joint European response to globalisation. Buti and Pichelmann (2017) focus on the increasing tension between proponents of globalisation and the populations of EU member states that has resulted in a rising tide of nationalistic and, in fact, often nativist, go-it-alone policy approaches. The EU has, thus, been charged with undermining national autonomy, identity and control.

For Buti and Pichelmann, it appears that while the EU integration process has been the bedrock for peace and economic development for half a century, it can no longer be taken for granted. In particular, they note that the EU integration process has traditionally been conceived as a means to square the circle, allowing for the catching up with economic growth and convergence while preserving Europe’s social model as reflected in the EU social *acquis*. The financial crisis has, however, only fuelled an already existing undercurrent of discontent and fading trust in democratic institutions and in the willingness of elites to deal with the (real or imagined) unfair distribution of benefits and burdens in society. In this context, EU institutional settings and policies are increasingly being perceived as having a pro-market bias and paying little (if any) attention to their social impact that has undermined cohesion, solidarity, autonomy and governability at the national, regional and local levels. The backlash against globalisation and EU integration, thus, runs deeper than cheap populism since it has economic and cultural roots that should not be dismissed too easily.

The losers in the globalisation process have become highly visible while the middle classes have seen scant evidence of once promised gains. Whether or not globalisation is the main culprit, it does not take a populist to notice that the last few decades have seen the top 1% grab an ever-growing share of the national income and wealth while median incomes have stagnated. It has to be acknowledged that some attacks from populists respond to real grievances; moreover, not everyone who criticises the ruling elites is a populist. What is

striking, however, about populism is the rhetoric that it draws on: amidst multiple insecurities that threaten the social fabric, populists invoke the dichotomies of “real people” versus “the establishment” and honest (native) ordinary people versus corrupt elites. They also claim to represent the true will of the people and to express common sense instead of manipulated expert opinions. Their standard repertoire, thus, includes ridiculing expert opinions (a task that is admittedly sometimes all too easy) and denouncing statistical evidence as abstract and out of line with the experiences of ordinary people. Populists have also been quick to realise the potential of social media given their (partly real, partly imaginary) claims to create a space for common identity and to establish direct links between citizens and their true representatives who speak the will of the no-longer-silent majority. In this context, Buti and Pichelmann (2017) note that cultural globalisation and identity politics have afforded populist regimes a kind of soft power; they have only needed to insert an enemy image as content.

Significantly, the EU has been highly vulnerable to populism since the long period of representative democracy was dominated by a legal or formalistic approach to EU democracy. The recent populist wave has only confirmed that the “capacity for electoral institutions to affect attitudes about representative democracy may be more limited than previously appreciated” (Donovan – Karp 2017: 469). Legal formalities matter even less in ECE while political corruption and social inequality are more substantive issues. When asked “what they expected from democracy as a general concept, and what they thought democracy actually delivered in their own country” (Donovan – Karp 2017: 471) – a distinction usually analysed in David Easton’s terms of diffuse versus specific support for democracy – people in ECE reported a much bigger gap or contrast between the two categories than those in the old member states. Similarly, in one of the most recent populism studies, Agerberg (2017: 581) emphasises that the good government and democratic behaviour of elites have substantial impact on people’s specific support for the political system. He also notes that high rates of corruption have greatly contributed to the populist wave in ECE and drastically diminished any specific support for democracy.

Looking more closely at the ECE, it is clear that after a period of soft populism characterised by attacks on the “old” and “postcommunist” impotent domestic elite, the new hard populist regimes have found an enemy in the EU. In this vein, they have used “Brussels” as a bugaboo for the consolidation of autocratic regimes. To make matters worse, ECE governments have produced a series of placebo reforms that claimed to target increasing inequality after the global crisis; the failure of these reforms has only reinforced the populist drive. This manipulation of the placebo effect is most striking among those ECE populist parties whose empty promises in the media have created the appearance of functioning democratic institutions and practices; in this way, they suggest that their government would have acted to save the poorest in society from the

dire effects of the crisis. This crisis of representative democracy may be hard to overcome in ECE since no strategic steps have been taken to end the division of society into winners and losers, and indeed, even some winners are threatened by these precarious conditions. Instead, ECE populist movements have offered the false medicine of identity politics, which has become a key feature of representative democracy in crisis.

The “nested game” approach: The historical trajectory of ECE Eupopulism

Although domestic socio-economic and political processes bear most of the blame for the apparent surge of populism in ECE, the EU’s neglect and inaction around ECE crisis management have also contributed significantly to the emergence of hard populism. During the 2010s, the EU has given growing manoeuvring room to incoming populist elites to grab power and consolidate hard populism through second party systems after critical elections. This nested game, or two-level process, and its close relationship with the emergence of hard populism is not usually discussed in European Studies since the EU’s negative externalities generally remain a forgotten dimension of Core–Periphery relations. In fact, the Core–Periphery divide since the global crisis has split the EU more deeply than ever before and produced a specific Eupopulism in the “East”.

This situation demands a radical re-conceptualisation since new analytical devices are needed to theorise these new conflicts between the Core and the Periphery. I would suggest that a three-step analysis of the nested game can shed some light on the divergence of ECE states from mainstream EU developments. This analysis might proceed as follows: (1) The point of departure is the total “civilisational” (socio-economic and cultural) deficit of the ECE states before accession and their emerging relative deficit after accession; this deficit in civic political culture produced weak informal institutions; (2) The result has been a gap between the ECE states’ external, formal-legal Europeanisation and their internal, substantive-cultural Europeanisation during their membership; this deficit has led to “formal” rather than “effective” membership, that is, to the construction of legal scenery that still has no socio-economic content behind it and to steadily increasing socio-political polarisation; (3) The endgame has been the emergence of hard populism with relative de-Europeanisation and de-democratisation in the EU. Cumulative societal frustration and a new cultural deficit have, thus, ruined emerging participatory and sustainable democracies, and this has led to socio-economic and political deconsolidation.⁴

4 In this vein, we should also distinguish between absolute and relative socio-economic exclusion. Absolute exclusion refers to the situation of the millions who lost jobs that were pegged to an older age of industrialisation and were never reintegrated into society. In contrast, relative exclusion describes those

In contrast, from the EU's standpoint, this historical trajectory might unfold as follows: (1) At the start of the accession process, the EU did not respond to ECE's historical deficit and, thus, did not create a road map to deal with the historical and new relative deficits emerging from the new institutional and cultural demands of membership (see my remarks on the Copenhagen dilemma below); (2) The EU accepted superficial, formal-legal transformations as valid Europeanisation and democratisation and hoped for a "trickle-down" effect despite all increasingly dramatic evidence to the contrary (see my remarks on the excuse of differentiated integration below); (3) The Core underestimated emerging ECE hard populism, which it took to be a transitory political deviation despite the deepening socio-economic crisis (see my remarks on "light touch" legal mechanisms below). All in all, then, it seems clear that neglect and an absence of empathy have proven highly counterproductive for Core-Periphery relations in the 2010s.

It must be reiterated that European Studies has ignored the distinction between absolute (historical) and relative (EU-related) deficits. On this count, it is important to note that after World War II, the ECE states were excluded from Western developments and they entered a new, unknown socio-political universe upon their EU membership. At the start of democratisation, the ECE countries, thus, had a much lower level of economic development than their Western counterparts as well as a serious institutional and cultural deficit. I call this historical legacy the "absolute" deficit and note that it was increased significantly by accession given the "relative" deficit created by the new, very complex requirements of EU membership. Sztompka (2000) argues justifiably that the accession process generated dual effects of "triumph and trauma" and this has produced a socio-cultural deficit. Although on the one hand ECE populations experienced triumph in their so-called return to Europe, on the other, they worried about their lack of competitiveness in the midst of globalisation. This cumulative absolute and relative deficit has dictated ECE's trajectory in recent decades to a great extent. Moreover, over the last quarter of a century, this deficit has not disappeared but, on the contrary, only grown in many respects.⁵

This situation is particularly clear from the treatment of the refugee crisis. Lehne (2016) writes that the "European response to the refugee crisis has been rooted in deep-seated structural factors" (p.?), an observation that rings particularly true for ECE. The negative stance taken by ECE countries on the refugee

who have been marginalised for failing to meet the new socio-economic requirements. This situation has destroyed the myth of the emerging middle class.

5 As the title of Ivan Krastev's (2016) article "Liberalism's Failure to Deliver" indicates, the "liberal order" has not delivered what it promised to EU populations. For more on this theme, see Dawson and Hanley (2016) and, more generally, the October 2016 and January 2017 special issues of *Journal of Democracy* on ECE populism. For more specific analyses, see Rupnik (2016), Bugarcic and Ginsburg (2016) and Fomina and Kucharczyk (2017) on the "new spectre" haunting ECE.

situation can be traced not only to elitist politics, but to a prevailing mindset; the increasingly negative mood of these states is anchored both in their heritage and in the experience of the socio-economic crisis among the vast majority of ECE populations. Lehne (2016) observes that “[e]ven more negative were the reactions in Central European member states, which had lived in relative isolation for decades and whole societies were unprepared for large influxes of foreigners” (p. 3). Against this backdrop, the EU has produced what might be called a *crisis of crisis management*, having failed to realise the meaning of the refugee crisis for the EU population as a whole and for ECE populations particularly with their specific historical experience over centuries and their unpreparedness for non-European migration. For these reasons and because of the EU’s neglect of ECE’s particular situation, the refugee crisis has pushed ECE populations into the worst kind of native-identity politics. Through its counter-productive approach, the EU has, thus, contributed to the re-nationalisation of ECE politics and the consolidation of hard populism.

As for the divergence between external and internal Europeanisation, it must be noted that large Western constitutional institutions were transferred to ECE in the absence of their socio-cultural environments, that is, without the proper social embeddedness and informal underpinnings that make formal institutions work. Furthermore, this socio-economic and cultural environment has not been developed during the membership period. As we have seen, the EU did not provide ECE states with a road map as a catch-up strategy when they entered this unchartered territory. Rather, as Scharpf (2015) points out, the Union’s main strategy was a very general plan of formal “judicial integration” that actually amounted to “bypass[ing] [...] integration through law” (p. 386). All this took place without any regard for the socio-economic preconditions or socio-political outcomes of legislative activity. Instead, the EU was treated as a homogeneous social and cultural space for the application of any kind of legislation.

Given this background, Scharpf (2015) has, in fact, proposed a new approach to explain the EU “polycrisis”; it is, he writes, the cumulative effect of this process of integration through law:

Governments have failed to appreciate the coup d’état of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), which in 1963 and 1964 had postulated the supremacy and direct effect of European law. As a consequence, ‘integration through law’ became an option to bypass political legislation through ‘judicial legislation’ if agreement in the Council could not be obtained.

Furthermore, Scharpf (2015) notes that even in times of crisis, “bypass[ing] integration through law has been effective” and serious conflicts have been “resolved through judicial action” despite a lack of economic and political feasibility (p. 396). This long-term EU strategy – moving forward via judicial action while neglecting reality and lacking proper economic, political and social integration – has amounted to pseudo-conflict resolution and only added to the

tensions. As such, it has heightened the opposition of the EU population as a whole to technocratic-professional elites with their regular victory reports. At the same time, it has compounded the sense of a world of elites that is separate from the actual world perceived by citizens. The hardships of the global crisis have, thus, been followed by a surge of populism in which the contrast between “real people” and “impotent elites” is proclaimed across Europe.

This populist eruption has been fiercest in ECE. Populist resentment has run high in the region since neoliberal policies have harmed a large section of the population. Moreover, while the Union has remained obsessed with legal transformations in ECE, it has neglected the real workings of newly made formal mega-institutions. This has produced a duality based in the deep tension between the external and internal Europeanisation of ECE socio-political systems. This contrast between external and internal Europeanisation runs through the entire history of ECE political systems. Moreover, external Europeanisation has only scratched the surface of the changes required in ECE countries. Sustainable democracies are, thus, yet to emerge in the ECE region since meaningful political participation remains missing. ECE populations have perceived this gap as a high treason of the elites, with the lack of Europeanisation and democratisation in the real world pushing people into the arms of populists.

It is worth returning here to the Copenhagen criteria for EU member states, which set out general requirements about democracy and competitiveness. These criteria vaguely indicated the need for capacity for membership, but did nothing to design and implement tools to support Europeanisation and democratisation during the catch-up process. In fact, the EU “impos[ed] uniform policies and institutions on dramatically different economies and societies” since “the EU never had positive development programs for the integration of the CEE countries” (Bruszt – Langbein 2017: 1, 3). As a result, classic, democracy-supporting informal institutions were not completed in the first decades of democratisation and to date they have been beset by fatal weaknesses. It is no wonder, then, that in the 2010s, the theme “Copenhagen revisited” has returned with such a vengeance. Back in the early 2010s, critics noted the weaknesses of the Copenhagen criteria, pointing to the lack of any consistent approach to accession, assessment and assistance and fuzzy boundaries around concepts such as democracy and the rule of law. Even so, it was presumed that EU accession would unleash magical transformations in the legal-political, economic and social-cultural realms with the trickling down of formal achievements in all three areas. To attain formal membership, ECE countries had established all EU *formal* institutions but they did not develop proper *informal* civil society institutions. The assumptions were that these large formal institutions would accomplish the transition to democracy and that ECE countries that had become democratic would stay democratic. In contrast, in identifying the Copenhagen dilemma, Viviane Reding, the Commissioner for Legal Affairs, noted that the

EU had had serious leverage to push for democratic order before accession, but it had lost the legal and other means to do so after accession. This dilemma has since taken on broader meaning, coming to refer to the paradoxical process of supporting non-democratic regimes through EU transfers.

On the basis, in the first post-accession period up to the late 2000s, an external Europeanisation programme was dominant in ECE states. These states tried to follow all the legal rules but did not change their socio-cultural environment through any kind of internal or domestic Europeanisation. Instead, they observed the EU “formalities”, including those around institution-building, and created big formal institutions that produced an empty or façade democracy along with various kinds of soft “domestic” populism. Against this, the second phase of post-accession has been marked by the global crisis and subsequent hard populist and (semi-)authoritarian systems that have clearly violated the formalities of the rule of law; these systems have defied EU rules and values as part of their “alienation” from the EU mainstream. We may, thus, note a sharp contrast between the two periods: while the first was characterised by governments and parties that continued to follow EU formalities around the rule of law, in the second, incoming governments and parties have tried to circumvent EU rules and values and sometimes openly violated EU rules. These entities have cared only about the semblance, that is, the external surface representing what their domestic political system looks like from outside. They have, thus, pretended to be democratic in order to hide the undemocratic substance of their regimes. While the Polish and Hungarian regimes are classic cases of this phenomenon, other ECE countries have reflected a similar trend, at least in part.⁶

Finally, we may note signs of a relative or partial de-Europeanisation occurring on the EU’s southern and eastern peripheries in the wake of the global crisis. Relative de-Europeanisation entails the violation of EU rules and values in a spirit of illiberal democracy, and both it and hard populism have accelerated in the 2010s. We may call this process “relative” since it has not reached the level of “absolute” de-Europeanisation, i.e. a decision to exit the Union even in the midst of post-Brexit turmoil. The EU has concentrated its crisis management efforts on saving the “main building” of European architecture, that is, the Eurozone, while fighting to keep the Schengen area intact during the refugee crisis. It is still an open question whether the relative disintegration on the southern periphery can be stopped and reversed. Meanwhile the process is certainly intensifying on the eastern periphery with deconsolidation in many sites across the ECE. Moreover, given ECE’s lack of resilience to the global

6 A key example is the meeting of the Visegrád Four (V4) prime ministers with Israeli PM Netanyahu on 19 July 2017 in Budapest. This was a big show event and clear evidence of the spirit that some have called a “Europe of nations”.

crisis, it would appear that the critical turning point for relative disintegration occurred earlier in this region than it did elsewhere in the EU; in general, it seems to have happened in ECE before the crisis since these states were unable to switch to an “innovation driven economy” (see WEF 2017a, b).

The coming of an apparent age of uncertainty in the 2010s prompted a loss of historical perspective in ECE with earlier visions of the future fading for an entire population. Indeed, since the mid-2000s, the old “modernisation and Europeanisation” narrative has disappeared and a new “traditionalisation and national sovereignty” narrative has claimed the upper hand. This new narrative has eroded faith in earlier democratic structures and, with the rise of new “critical” parties, it has led to supposedly critical elections. Former mainstream parties, which represented the old pro-EU narrative and campaigned in this spirit, have since been ousted or marginalised in these elections, while parties which advocate the new “nativist” narrative have taken their place.

This effect can be explained in terms of a lack of *democratic resilience*, a quality that depends on state and societal resistance to crisis. In fact, a recent EU security document names the attainment of the “resilience of democracy” as a “strategic priority” for the EU, arguing that “[s]tates are resilient when societies feel they are becoming better off and have hope for the future” This is clearly not the case for ECE, which has also been missing the precondition for democratic resilience: “[s]ocietal resistance” that has been “strengthened by deepening relations with civil society, notably in its efforts to hold governments accountable” (EU Global Strategy 2016: 26–27). ECE societies have lost their vision for the future, which was based on the “modernisation and Europeanisation” narrative. In short, after the global crisis, ideas of a cohesive Europe or social Europe have either disappeared off the horizon of EU development or been reduced to pure rhetoric. The so-called social dimension of the EU and associated vision of prosperity have, thus, been lost for ECE populations. In the last quarter of a century, the internal cohesion of ECE countries has seriously decreased alongside rising inequality. Thus, we find that instead of economic cohesion, dual economies have emerged; instead of social cohesion, there has been growing social polarisation; and instead of territorial cohesion, ECE countries have been split into two – developed and underdeveloped – parts. As a result, since the early 2010s, ECE populations have lost trust in political institutions and the political class.⁷

7 I outline the “soft” side of relative de-Europeanisation and de-Democratisation in a parallel publication: see “The declining systemic trust in the NMS political elites: The divergence between East-Central Europe and the Baltic States”, forthcoming in the *Baltic Journal of Political Science*.

The heavy price paid for avoiding conflicts with hard populism in the EU

As we have seen, during the first phase of EU membership, ECE states kept up the “formalities”. As a result, institution-building went ahead for large formal institutions, and this resulted in the undermining of democracy and the emergence of façade democracies. In the second phase, in contrast, declining democracies have pursued a policy of non-compliance, sometimes even openly confronting the EU. These states have defied the European architecture, clearly violating EU rules and values and engaging in a long fight with the EU over the rule of law. While Poland and Hungary were the first countries to enter into this new phase, other ECE countries have now come close though with much hesitation and some strategic moves here and there. For this reason, the standard theory of varied integration – requiring the constant stretching of that concept over several decades – cannot be extended. In its place, we need a new conceptual framework that focuses on the distinction between permissive formal Europeanisation and conflictual partial de-Europeanisation. I began this article with an analysis of the substance of de-Europeanisation in ECE, focusing on ECE’s drifting away from mainstream EU socio-economic and politico-cultural developments. We need now, however, to consider the formal side of this process, that is, the violations of EU legal rules and fundamental values that are the endgame for hard populism.

In fact, since the early '90s, Viktor Orbán’s governments have been developing and implementing a three-step master plan for a complete populist takeover. On coming to power in 2010, the Orbán government, thus, abandoned the historical plan of building democratic institutions, implementing EU rules and formally complying with European law. Instead, after a period of chaotic democracy and shallow EU integration, the government demonstrated its disrespect for the rule of law and maintained only a democratic façade. While formally accepting EU regulations, Orbán’s government did something else, sometimes the opposite of the law, or what Orbán publicly called the “peacock dance in the EU”. The new populist regime, thus, set out and systematically followed a three-stage master plan to transform Hungary from a weak democracy into a stable autocratic regime, reducing the democratic structure to a mere electoral democracy in which its re-election would be secured by means from constitutional devices to the soft power of mediatised politics. After replacing the Constitution with a fundamental law in the spirit of 19th century nationalism, the government, thus, applied its plan from the top to the bottom of the state’s institutional architecture. The first step was the full capture of all state machinery from the secret services to the public media and the staffing of all top state administration positions with political appointees. The second step was the dismantling of checks-and-balances institutions with pressure on judges

and control gained over intermediary institutions to ensure they represented government interests. And the third and final step was the de-politicisation of society through attacks on civil society to destroy all forms of civic autonomy and through a “Putinisation” branding all those with international connections as “foreign agents”.⁸

This periodisation suggests discrete stages of de-Europeanisation and de-democratisation in Hungary but the reality is that these steps have largely overlapped. At the same time, they have been applied systematically with a sharp and strategic focus on each stage. Under the Orbán government, Hungary has undergone almost all three stages of the master plan to demolish liberal democracy. The government is now in the third stage of attacking civil society organisations. On 4 April 2017, Hungarian parliament, thus, adopted Act XXV of 2017 on Higher Education, which targeted Central European University (usually known as “Lex CEU”) with the goal of shutting the university down. On 14 June 2017, it then enacted Act LXXVI of 2017, which amended the 2011 Act on Civil Society and reduced the space for independent civic organisations with international connections, described as “Lex foreign agents”.

From the inside, this process has looked like a full de-politicisation of domestic politics under the tyranny of a parliamentary majority. In contrast, it has appeared from the outside – that is, from elsewhere in the EU – as a re-nationalisation of politics, an idea symbolised by the forest of national flags that appears at public events and state press conferences where there is no EU flag in sight. At the domestic level, the Hungarian government has been doing all it can to stay in power while the darkening mood across the country has left the public apathetic. Meanwhile, at the transnational level, the government has been invoking national sovereignty as sacrosanct and pushing the EU to the absolute limit in an effort to provoke a confrontation; it has tested the Union’s responses over and over. The entire process has, thus, gone beyond state capture and reached the level of a full capture of democracy. In sum, authoritarian drift has joined forces with the re-nationalisation of ECE politics. A strikingly similar picture has emerged in Poland, whose history of shallow rather than deep integration has also facilitated the brutal transformation of democratic architecture after the claiming of power. The key difference is that in Hungary, the Orbán government has enjoyed a two-thirds supermajority for most of the time since the 2010 elections while in Poland, the “good change” of de-Europeanisation and de-democratisation has only been under way since the 2015 election. The Polish government, in contrast, has had only a simple

8 This article can only provide an overview of this historical trajectory with some reference to the latest developments. On current Hungarian issues, see Bárd (2017). There is no space here to describe the Polish developments, which I have discussed elsewhere.

parliamentary majority, which has significantly complicated its violation of EU rules and values (Bugaric – Ginsburg 2016).

These problems with the eastern periphery have come as a big surprise to the EU where “such a challenge to democratic rule was never seriously considered as something the EU may face” (Ekiert 2017: 10). As we have seen, the Orbán government attracted particular attention and special treatment when it came to power in the 2010s and began to drift seriously away from the EU mainstream, but the signs of a populist-nativist turn have also been felt in other ECE countries. Szalai-Krausz (2014) notes that in the 2010s “[t]he EU witnessing these systemic problems of rule of law, human rights and democracy has realised that the present tools at its service are limited [...] [and] not sufficient to tackle such issues” (p. 1). In fact, despite awareness of the Copenhagen dilemma, the Union has up to very recently proven defenceless against aggressive hard populist regimes. The EU’s weak and controversial responses have instead had the counterproductive effect that I have termed the Juncker paradox, with the West’s neglect and narrow focus on its own priorities only increasing Eastern populism. I would suggest that there have been three turning points in this process: the first was the Tavares Report (EP 2013) and the Barroso Commission’s “Communication” (EC 2014) response to key divergences; the second was the 2017 European People’s Party declaration, which expressed European centre-right parties’ criticisms in the context of aligned parties; and the third was a September 2017 speech by Jean-Claude Juncker which has finally signalled the start of a major offensive against hard populism.

Hungary’s basic divergence from the democratic mainstream under the Orbán government was described back in the Tavares Report, which was adopted by European Parliament (EP) on 3 July 2013 with the support of a large majority. This report is still the most precise EU document on the decline of democracy in ECE. In discussing the Hungarian case, it called for a “Copenhagen Commission” with an all-European scope and stressed the need for the “establishment of a new mechanism to ensure compliance by all Member States with the common values enshrined in Article 2 TEU” (Tavares 2013: 15). Known as the guardian of democracy, EP has remained the most active institutional defender of democracy based on the rule of law in the EU; it, thus, initiated a series of parliamentary debates on the “situation in Hungary” that reflected this critical mood (see e.g. EP 2015, 2016, 2017c, b). At the same time, the Tavares Report also exposed EP to a wider public debate, leading to calls for the oversight of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights in all member states.

Though the Barroso Commission (2009–2014) operated in the toughest period of global crisis management as hard populist and/or Eupopulist regimes emerged in ECE, it developed some sensitivity to the ECE situation, responding first to a series of violations of the rule of law. The initial turning point was President Barroso’s Union address (State of the Union, 12 September

2012), which introduced the term “systemic failure” in an early reference to the Hungarian situation. By 2013, all three major EU institutions had entered the debate in diverging roles. The Commission, the so-called guardian of treaties, soon became the chief actor, delivering an important decision in 2014. That basic document, known as the Commission Communication of 11 March 2014, marked a legal innovation, presenting new holistic concepts like “systemic failure” and “systemic threats” to the rule of law and offering a “framework” to counter the problem:

Today the European Commission adopted a new framework for addressing systemic threats to the rule of law in any of the EU’s 28 Member States. [...] [T]here is a need to develop a tool to deal at the EU level with systemic threats to the rule of law. [...] The new framework does not constitute or claim new competences for the Commission but makes transparent how the Commission exercises its role under the Treaties. [...] The framework can be activated in situations where there is a systemic breakdown which adversely affects the integrity, stability and proper functioning of the institutions and mechanisms established at national level to secure the rule of law. The EU framework is not designed to deal with individual situations of isolated cases of breaches of fundamental rights or miscarriages of justice. (EC 2014: 1, 2)

This March 2014 Commission Communication achieved a breakthrough with its new framework that might be summed up by the key words “systemic” and “master plan”. Under the Commission’s holistic approach, posing a systemic threat to Europeanisation was seen as a serious violation of EU rules and values; moreover, the systemic action of hard populism was countered with the same strategy on the EU’s side. The Commission argued that Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) did not, in fact, simply present a list of discrete values and the related requirements for proper behaviour by member states; rather, this was a comprehensive and coherent system of values defining the European democratic system in its entirety. All in all, this Commission Communication cleared the way to tackle serious and systemic violations of the rule of law framework (RoLF). For all its shortcomings, this was an innovative document and it made for a good start to 2014 even if in some ways it was too little too late. Notably, it remained both too much and too soon for the Council, which sabotaged its implementation for years in actions led by the UK and joined by ECE governments.

Undoubtedly, there were two big problems with the EU’s new “master plan”. First of all, there was a presumption that “suspected” member states were ready and willing to engage in dialogue, and, thus, that this “mechanism” was bound to produce a positive result. This presumption was highly questionable since in countries where the ruling elites had made a conscious choice to flout EU rules, engaging in such a dialogue was unlikely to be fruitful. Secondly, the Council’s legal service claimed that the Commission had overstepped its powers

and that the new regulation undermined the role of member states within the Council. Unsurprisingly, this criticism of RoLF originated from governments with poor records on the rule of law. Ultimately, then, as Kochenov and Pech (2015) conclude, while the RoLF was designed to address systemic threats to EU rules under Article 2 of the TEU, it continued to represent the “triumph of empty rhetoric over genuine action” (p. 3).⁹

In any case, the innovative first step taken by the Barroso Commission was halted with the arrival of a new Commission. From the very outset, the new Juncker Commission was overwhelmed by the “polycrisis” and focused on crisis management in the Core by marginalising all other issues including the deepening Core–Periphery divide noted in the RoLF. Russack (2017) has analysed the Juncker Commission’s ten priorities in 2014, recalling its motto, “Be big and more ambitious on big things and small and more modest on small things” (p. 2). This strategy obviously misfired when it came to the “small things” since the violations of EU rules and values actually turned into a frozen conflict. Moreover, the marginalising of the new crisis in the “East” through permanent conflict avoidance only made the situation much worse. As late as the mid-2010s, the Juncker Commission did not realise that ECE countries had been seriously hit by the global crisis or that this had unleashed a vicious circle of violations of Article 2 of the TEU. Nevertheless, by this point it was obvious that ECE’s deep structural problems originated from the lack of any special catch-up programme in the Copenhagen criteria, the accession process or any part of formal-legal “judicial integration”. ECE’s serious socio-economic problems had erupted after the global crisis, and the profound controversies around the region had come to the surface in the violations of EU legal formalities.

Since 2014 when the Commission declared itself too busy with “home affairs” in the Core, European Parliament has replaced it as the chief player in the RoLF, reflecting the Commission’s very earliest involvement in this process in cooperation with European Parliament. Several events have demonstrated the fallacy of the Commission’s assumptions about starting a “dialogue” with the Orbán government. That government has been systematically demolishing liberal democracy in Hungary and remains unready to engage in any dialogue. Instead, it has continued to enact its own master plan while making a few partial and specific compromises on infringement procedure issues. In contrast, under public pressure in the West, EP has dealt more efficiently with the Orbán government. EP resolutions on the “situation in Hungary” have detailed a long

9 There is extensive scientific literature about the RoLF. See, e.g., Closa and Kochenov (eds) (2016), Bárd et al. (2017) and Kaltwasser et al. (2017) and, beyond this, a plethora of professional blogs including Akkerman (2017), Blokker (2017), Brunnbauer and Haslinger (2017), Easterly (2016), Judis (2016), Juhász and Szicherle (2016), Katsambekis (2016), Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2016), LSP blogs-five views (2017), Szczerbiak (2017) and Youngs (2016).

list of the Hungarian government's conflicts with EU laws and authorities and provoked wide discussion.

These EP resolutions have not, however, significantly changed the activities of the Commission, which remains "in dialogue" about separate infringement procedures over ongoing violations by the Orbán government since the first half of 2017. As usual, these conflicts have been marginalised by EU authorities, which are irritated by Orbán's behaviour but consider it unimportant amidst the complexities of the EU polycrisis. So far, the Commission has also taken a "light-touch" approach to the infringement procedures around Hungary's new regulations. Meanwhile, what the EU assumed was just "window dressing" through "judicial integration" has started to look more like a broken window scenario in Hungary. During an EP plenary session about Lex CEU, MEPs pointed out that the EU was passively witnessing the systemic erosion of democracy in Hungary and they called for tougher measures. In response, on 26 April 2017, the Commission's Frans Timmermans informed EP that the Commission had launched an infringement procedure against the Hungarian government over this new "Higher Education Act". Again, however, this has led nowhere.

At the same time, the Orbán government—EU conflict has only deepened over the refugee crisis and the "Stop Brussels" campaign. In this context, a second turning point can be seen in a statement by EPP – part of the same group as Orbán's Fidesz – which expressed its profound disturbance at Orbán's extremism and took the strongest stance yet on the situation:

The EPP Presidency sent a clear message to Prime Minister Orbán and his party, Fidesz that we will not accept that any basic freedoms are restricted or rule of law disregarded. [...] The EPP has also made it clear to our Hungarian partners that the blatant anti-EU rhetoric of the "Let's stop Brussels" consultation is unacceptable. The constant attacks on Europe, which Fidesz has launched for years, have reached a level we cannot tolerate. (EPP 2017: 2).

It is clearly this message that led to the historic EP resolution calling for the application of Article 7 of the TEU against Hungary. This resolution was adopted by a large majority on 17 May 2017. Additionally, on 6 September 2017, the European Court of Justice rejected a claim by Hungary – together with Slovakia and supported by Poland – which challenged the allocation of refugees to those member states. This growing list of conflicts and confrontations awaits a serious response from the EU.

Conclusion: "Taming the beast" – Confronting hard populism in the EU

In responding to the widening Core–Periphery divide, the Core's prevailing mindset has been one of preoccupation with its own "priorities", which has actually meant reducing complex management tasks to direct and urgent conflict

management. This has led, in turn, to conflict avoidance and inaction in the Periphery. At the same time, the entire Eastern periphery has been undergoing an intensifying desecuritisation-deconsolidation process as these member states experience the drastic weakening of their positions both in the Union and in terms of global competitiveness. In general, the violations of liberal democracy by both Hungary and Poland in the 2010s have demonstrated that the rule of law now is now a contested concept. Originally this concept was developed for nation states to prevent any conflicts around “national sovereignty”. In the EU, however, it has been upgraded with an international-transnational dimension, incorporating multiple players from the international context including the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe with its influential Venice Commission. This situation presents a conflict by design since no proper law enforcement mechanism has been created for the “borderlines”. As a result, the domestic debate has been sabotaged by the Hungarian and Polish governments with their constant references to “national sovereignty”. The conflict has only escalated with the rise of the Kaczynski regime in Poland and the further decline of democratic structures in the other ECE states under unstable coalition governments.

At the same time, given the particular historical legacy of ECE states, their late arrival in the EU and their internal debates, they have often been reluctant to present their situations and legitimate regional interests to the EU. Despite the ugly face of current hard populist regimes, the message of the Visegrád Four (V4) to the March 2017 EU Rome Summit has particular relevance: “Member States’ identities and diverse traditions represent a key asset of the EU and shall remain a reference for its further developments” (V4 Joint Statement 2017: 3). In fact, Central European populations from Vienna to Prague, Bratislava to Budapest and Warsaw to Ljubljana have different historical experiences of non-European migration than their West European counterparts (Eupinions 2016; Pew 2016). Their social and cultural unpreparedness for the influx of refugees can easily be manipulated by xenophobic autocratic regimes in “Stop Brussels” campaigns under the pretext of protecting national sovereignty and culture.

Undoubtedly, the EU’s behaviour in the recent geopolitical crisis has assumed the EU’s total cultural homogeneity including on migration matters while also completely neglecting historically hidden and emerging issues in Central Europe as a whole (i.e. the V4 + Austria and Slovenia). Of the ten Juncker priorities presented on the installation of the new Commission, even those coming closest to sensitive rule-of-law and refugee-crisis issues – Priority 7 and Priority 8 – make no reference to ECE attitudes to the refugee crisis or rule-of-law violations in ECE states or the need for conflict management in these areas (EP 2017a: 20–26). This is an example of structural neglect and repeated inaction in crisis management. Notwithstanding the great and real significance of all ten

priorities, the complex silence around these specific problems in ECE amounts to a crisis of crisis management in the so-called East.¹⁰

There can be no question that the beast of ECE hard populism has to be tamed. After all, as Ekiert (2017) observes of Poland and Hungary:

[b]oth governments introduced politically motivated legislation that constituted clear breaches of EU law and European values, undermined the rule of law, and restricted individual freedoms. What we see in these two countries is a determined effort to really subvert the existing democratic system in a fundamental way (p. 7).

After a long series of declarations by Western leaders, Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign Affairs has recently stated with some justification that these brutal violations of EU values call into question these states' EU membership: "[By] the end of this year after all important elections are concluded, we need to ask Poland and Hungary whether they want to stay within the European Union and observe its principles" (quoted in Ekiert 2017: 3). Indeed, the Juncker paradox of tolerating hard populism through neglect has been pushed to its limits. As Mudde (2017) noted recently: "The EU has tolerated Viktor Orbán too long. It has to take a stand now" (p. 1).

The end of 2017 has seen a new turning point on these issues. The EU has experienced consolidation after the global crisis while Brexit now appears to be manageable on the Union's side. At the same time, key state elections have been won by stopping the populist wave, and the discontent of developed EU states with ECE hard populism has reached a critical mass. Western leaders have sent the repeat message that enough is enough and there can no more patience around rule-of-law violations by Polish and Hungarian hard populist regimes. In a somewhat optimistic mood, the EU has begun to propose stronger and wider forms of integration. Both this optimism and the new policy against hard populism were communicated powerfully in Juncker's latest State of the Union address. Coming after the presentation of five scenarios for the EU in March 2016, the address outlined a new strategy ("scenario six") for the accelerated further federalisation of the EU including a strong warning that all member states must respect the rule of law in the EU (Juncker 2017: 4–5, 13 September 2017).¹¹

All in all, 2017 has been a "reflection year" for the EU (Andor 2017: 1). Responding to Juncker's address, Daniel Gros (2017), thus, asks a basic question:

10 Viviane Reding, the chief architect of the RoLF, recently stated "we have to ask ourselves: what to do when a Member State knowingly destroys the constitutional basis of its democracy? That is why the institutions need new tools to credibly counter these new challenges." (2017: 2).

11 As Grabbe and Lehne (2017) report, various actors including governments have suggested that "new conditions that would tie the access to EU funds to a country's performance on governance and the rule of law" might have "a powerful deterrent effect", noting that it is "[t]ime for [g]overnments to [t]ake a [s]tand" (p. 6).

“Where is Europe heading?” His answer directly echoes the two key messages of the address as well as the emerging public consensus in the EU. On the one hand, Brexit provides a new opportunity for greater integration, while on the other, it makes clear ECE hard populism remains a major obstacle to that same integration:

The departure of the UK now opens the door for a future in which essentially all member states share one currency and their citizens are free to move across borders without control. [...] Unfortunately, however, a new threat to Europe’s future has now reared its ugly head. This time, it concerns the nations’ commitment to the democratic values of the Union, notably the principle of the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the importance of a free press. This is a fundamental conflict (basically between the old member states, on one side, and Poland and Hungary, on the other), which cannot be papered over with financial concessions or some other compromise. Nevertheless, it must be resolved before the EU can make further progress down the road mapped out by President Juncker (Gros 2017: 1)

All public opinion polls show that the vast majority of Hungarians and Poles support EU membership and feel proud to be European citizens. The Hungarian and Polish publics have experienced EU membership for more than a decade, and thus, a new generation has grown up in the midst of Europeanisation and democratisation. Having come through the years of societal frustration that led to the capture of their democracies by hard populist regimes, Poland and Hungary can and will return to the mainstream of European development, and they will do this with full democracy and respect for the rule of law.

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Analyzing Malaise and Mobilization: The Effects of Media on Political Support and European Identity in Old and New Member States

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Abstract: *The recent financial crisis and the way it was handled by European Union (EU) received a great deal of media coverage, and since the media has a tendency to alter public opinion, it is safe to assume that it has affected some Europeans' attitudes towards the EU. In order to test that assumption, a model was built around the theoretical framework of "media malaise," and »political support«. It was found that the media certainly affected and shaped public opinion; however, study revealed that consuming media has not made people more cynical towards the EU. Based on secondary data analysis of Eurobarometer the study reveals positive relationship of media mobilization effect with European's political attitudes and identity.*

Keywords: *European identity, Eurobarometer, media malaise, media mobilization, media effects, political support*

Introduction

The creation of the European Union (EU), a supranational organisation that aims to enhance continent-wide cooperation and unification, is an excellent example of political community-building. Bringing such a community into existence has, however, been a daunting task. Since its inception, the EU has undergone many transformations in order to earn the political support of the people and the legitimate right to govern Europeans (Fuchs 2011). Political support is crucial for any governing institution, but it was not until a 1975 report by Tindeman that the gap between citizens and institutions of the Eu-

European Communities (EC) was first acknowledged and presented as a source of tension for further European integration (Ruchet 2011). That report paved the way for discussions among political elites about how to transform the EC into a supranational institution while pursuing policies that would ultimately allow citizens to identify themselves with the EC.

Following the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the EC became the EU, and Europe witnessed its transformation into an intergovernmental organisation with extensive capabilities and competencies. Binding decisions taken at EU level began to have an increasing impact on the lives of citizens of the member states and a stronger effect on distribution matters. The EU has since changed from being a predominantly economic institution to one that is more political, raising questions about its legitimacy and the democratic deficit in public and scientific debates (Majone 1998; Hix 2008; Scharpf 2009). These debates have addressed another dimension of European identity, inquiring into whether and to what extent Europeans require a “concomitant European identity to guarantee the democratic legitimation of the institutions of EU and its decision making” (Fuchs 2011: 28).

Today, two decades after the Maastricht Treaty, these debates are very much alive mainly as a result of the complex economic, political and social challenges being faced by the EU. This article does not, however, focus on the conceptual and political challenges for the EU. Instead, it argues that the collective sense of European identity is a form of political support which does not always rely on economic benefits and may also be affected by relevant media consumption. Additionally, I contend that the recent Eurozone crisis has had different impacts on the various indicators of political support in the different EU member states. In order to assess these variations, I classify these states into two groups. The first is comprised of all of the member states that were part of the EU before its biggest ever enlargement in 2004 while the second group consists of the countries that joined the Union as a result of that enlargement. This study, thus, views the pre-2004 members as “old” and the post-2004 enlargement members as “new” member states.

To lay the groundwork for this investigation, the following section discusses the theoretical framework against which this study is situated. I then turn to the important relationship between media consumption and European identity and review the relevant literature. In the remaining parts, I present my empirical research along with the results and a discussion of key issues.

Theoretical framework

Political Support

The persistent attempts of scholars to find points of comparison between the “form of governing institutions, and political culture” can be traced back to

Aristotle (Klingemann 1999: 50). However, modern theorists have relied extensively on Easton’s (1965; 1975) concept of political support and related tenets when approaching this issue. Easton’s concept is indeed one of the most useful analytic frameworks regarding political support since it distinguishes among support for a political community, for a regime and for authorities (Norris 1999). In explaining the differences among these three objects, Klingemann (1999) argues that a *political community* is a cultural object that goes beyond the particularities of any formal governing structures and represents the collective identity of the polity. In contrast, a *regime* is a basic framework for governance (Norris 1999) while *political authorities* are officials occupying government posts (Klingemann 1999). Table 1 sets out Fuchs’s (2011) modified representation of Easton’s political support framework.

Table 1: Political support framework

Types of Political Support	Political Support Constructs	Political Support Sub-constructs
<i>Political community</i> Sense of community (diffuse support)	Identity	European identity
<i>Regime</i> Legitimacy (diffuse support) Trust (diffuse support)	Legitimacy Trust	Satisfaction with European democracy Trust in EU institutions
<i>Political authorities</i> (specific support)	Evaluation of short-term output	Evaluation of the national and European economies

Note: The first two columns are adopted from Fuchs (2011) while the sub-constructs in the third column are used in the current empirical analysis. These sub-constructs have been chosen because of their similarity to the political constructs described by Easton (1965) and their applicability to the selected datasets.

As this table makes clear, Easton (1965) distinguishes the political support required by the three objects into two types: diffuse and specific support. Diffuse support refers mainly to the political community and regime; it does not focus on the performances of any particular components but rather considers the system as a whole (Fuchs 2011; Beaudonnet – Di Mauro 2012). As Easton (1975) explains, diffuse support concerns “what an object is or represents [,] not what it does” (p. 444). As such, diffuse support for a political community manifests in a “*sense of community*” and a “we-feeling” or a “feeling of belonging together” (Easton 1965: 185). The related political construct is identity, which encompasses the idea of a “we-feeling”. The current study understands this sense of collective identity as European identity and takes this as the main dependant variable in this investigation.

As with the political community, Easton presents several political constructs that relate to the regime component. For regimes, these constructs are legitimacy and trust. Legitimacy “reflects the fact that in some vague or explicit way [, a person] sees these objects as conforming to his own moral principles, his own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere” (Easton 1975: 451). In line with this description, I would suggest that the construct of legitimacy can be operationalised by way of the indicator “satisfaction with democracy”. In contrast, trust is “stimulated by the experiences that members have of the authorities over time” (Easton 1975: 448). This investigation uses the indicator “trust in the institution of the EU” to measure trust in the regime as a predictor of diffuse support (Schäfer – Weber 2014).

The second type of support mentioned by Easton, specific support, refers to attitudes (or behaviours) that arise from an evaluation of authorities’ actions (Beaudonnet – Di Mauro 2012). Additionally, specific support is based on the perceived rewards of short-term output (Fuchs 2011: 31). The related political construct concerns the evaluation of political authorities based on their short-term output. As such, this article argues that people’s assessments of the economic situation can predict their evaluations of incumbents. To operationalise Easton’s notion of specific support, I therefore include people’s perceptions of the national and EU economies as indicators. Significantly, the national and EU economies are interdependent, and, thus, both are considered as indicators of specific support.

Having outlined the conceptual framework for political support, I need to turn to the importance of comparing old and new member states and state the rationale for grouping the different states as per their EU membership dates. Given Easton’s model, it may be argued that diffuse and specific support are highly interdependent. This is based on the logic that specific support, i.e. a performance evaluation based on short-term rewards, provides all that is needed to garner long-term diffuse support. Keeping this in mind, I have divided the member states into two groups in order to assess the different indicators of diffuse support in each group. I have also assumed that the difference between diffuse support in the old member states before and after the crisis will be less marked than is the case for the new member states. This assumption accords with Easton’s model, which suggests that diffuse support serves as a buffer against the erosion of incumbents’ support during a crisis and is more stable over time than specific support (Wessels 2007). As such, diffuse support should have remained stable with no or only a slight change after the crisis in the old member states. In contrast, there would have been significant post-crisis variations among the new members.

In order to better situate the theoretical framework for this study, I turn next to the dependent variable, i.e. European identity.

European Identity

Easton's (1965) notion of diffuse support for a particular political community is realised in the concept of European identity (Delanty 2002; Bruter 2005; Hooghe – Marks 2005). Since the Maastricht Treaty, this concept has played a central role in the debate on European integration and come to be seen as a separate dimension of political support since it is one of the main explanations for existing support for the EU (Hooghe – Marks 2004; McLaren 2005). There are several definitions of European identity available, but this article follows the reasoning of Herrmann and Brewer (2004), who have described the “cognitive, evaluative and affective meaning” of collective European identity on two different levels, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the concept (2004: 6). Fuchs (2011) stresses the importance of the first of these levels, which consists of individuals' subjective assignment and affective attachment to a particular collective. In sociological theories, this affective attachment is referred to as a we-feeling or feeling of belonging together in a community (Easton 1965; Scharpf 1999; Luhmann 2017).

In this investigation, I view affective attachment as an indicator of self-assignment to and identification with the European political community and use these terms interchangeably. Here it is important to highlight that collective identity is part of Easton's political support framework and interdependent with the other political constructs in that framework. This research, however, deems European identity to be a dependent variable and aims to explore its relationship with media consumption as well as other political constructs within the framework, focusing on the time frame before and after the Eurozone crisis in the old and new EU member states.

It must be emphasised that European identity remains subject to various conceptual and methodological challenges. As such, despite the fact that it has been rigorously investigated and the subject of many publications, the concept lacks any unanimous definition and is used in many different contexts and for different purposes. European identity has been assigned various attributes such as “abstract” (Strath 2002: 388), “flexible” (Walkenhorst 2008: 4), and “fluid [and] hybrid” (Maier – Risse 2003: 29). All of these descriptors attempt to highlight some characteristic of European identity from a specific vantage point, but collectively they do not support any particular agreement about the concept. In fact, these diverging interpretations of identity have led some scholars to challenge the very idea of investing time and resources in identity research because, in their view, the concept is so imprecise and contradictory that it can mean “anything” and “nothing” at the same time (Brubaker – Cooper 2000:1).

Nevertheless, while identity in general and European identity in particular are – like all social sciences concepts – highly contentious, their investigation remains important. For this reason, researchers in the field are continuing to

investigate these topics and reveal their varied manifestations, which are vital for explaining different theoretical and practical phenomena.

Returning to the main objective of this article, the following section reviews the literature on media and European identity and highlights its importance for the current research.

Media and European Identity

For the purposes of this inquiry, media refers only to the use of television to acquire EU-related information. This is primarily because of the widespread use of television compared to other media for gathering information on different political matters. Such extensive reliance on media is crucial for forming and affecting collective identities, as has been confirmed by scholars in various contexts (Schlesinger 1991; Fornas 1995; Silverstone 1999; Morley 2001; Bruch and Pfister, 2014). Georgiou (2006), for instance, states that “media...have become organized mechanisms of great significance for constructing identities in local, national and transnational contexts within modernity” (p. 11). Along the same lines, we may observe the European Broadcasting Union’s assertion in 1993 that broadcasting was playing “a decisive role” in affirming collective identity in the newly formed Central and Eastern European democracies (quoted in Luce 1993). Similarly, Meech and Kilborn’s (1992) case study of Scottish media concludes that the media contributes to “Scotland’s self-perception as a nation” (p. 258). The impact of media is particularly important when it comes to distant and abstract issues that the population does not have direct experience with (Page – Shapiro 1992). European identity, a political construct based on diffuse support for a political community, is one such issue because it affects people’s daily lives but remains abstract and at the mercy of the subjective perceptions of EU citizens (Vliegenthart – Schuck – Boomgaarden – De Vreese 2008). Since most Europeans learn about the EU through media, it is conceivable that the way people consume specific media sources on European matters also influences their subjective perceptions of the EU and eventually affects their European identity (Ceron 2015).

While there is a presumption that media consumption and identity are significantly related, research on the effects of this relationship in general and on European identity in particular remains “embryonic” with more empirical investigations needed to reveal how this affects people’s political identities (de Vreese – Boomgaarden 2006: 421). In the same vein, Rittberger and Maier (2008) point out that with few exceptions, the literature on public attitudes to EU integration has thus far neglected the role of the media in affecting people’s opinions about their European identity. Moreover, Müller and colleagues (2014) confirm that most media and identity researchers have concentrated on the present situation without examining the longstanding structures that might have led to it. In order to advance the scholarship on this topic, the current

study, thus, examines the effects of media consumption on European identity, comparing the situation in different years so as to expose the long-term effects of media on identity. In what follows, I outline the conceptual bases for two different effects of media.

The Effects of Media: Malaise and Mobilisation

In considering the impact of media on political attitudes, various studies have focused on media consumption as an explanatory variable. One particular effect that has been examined – and which is also addressed in this study – is media malaise. The concept of malaise emerged in the literature when Kurt and Gladys Lang (1966) first connected the increase in news consumption with feelings of disenchantment with American politics. These scholars further argued that television broadcasts fueled public cynicism by over-emphasising political conflict and downplaying routine policymaking (Norris 2000). The effects of malaise were not, however, given much attention until Robinson (1976) coined the term “video malaise” to highlight the connection between a reliance on American television journalism and feelings of political cynicism, social mistrust and a lack of political efficacy. Robinson’s (1976) research examined the assumption that the more time citizens spend watching television, the less political support they manifest. Since then, several research studies have addressed video malaise exclusively, focusing on the effects of TV consumption rather than media consumption in general.

The counter-argument to the media malaise thesis is also quite compelling. This argument claims that the media is not associated with malaise, but in fact has an opposite effect described as “mobilization” (Newton 1999: 580). Norris (1996: 2000), for instance, argues that while general TV-viewing is associated with apathy, attention to the news media is – contrary to the media malaise hypothesis – linked with positive indicators of civic engagement. Furthermore, research by Newton (1999) in the UK found that reading a broadsheet newspaper and watching a significant amount of television news were associated with having greater political knowledge, interest and understanding. Holtz-Bacha (1990) has demonstrated similar patterns linked to attention to the news media in Germany while Curtice, Schmitt-Beck and Schrott (1998) also reported positive findings concerning media consumption and political knowledge. In an exhaustive study, Bennett and colleagues (1999) found that trust in politics and trust in the news media go hand in hand, uncovering no evidence that news media consumption is related to political cynicism.

Building on all this research, the current study considers the arguments of both of the above schools of thought and seeks to explore the relationship between media consumption and European identity. To this end, I consider the situation before and after the Eurozone crisis in different EU member states.

Hypotheses

Based on the arguments that have been set out above and deduced from established theories, this section outlines five distinct hypotheses. The first (H1) specifically describes the political constructs of diffuse and specific support. The first part of this hypothesis assumes that the economic crisis triggered a change in political attitudes in both the old and new member states. A utilitarian explanatory model would suggest that the economic crisis in Europe changed the personal cost-benefit calculus for many citizens, who adapted their political attitudes accordingly (Schäfer – Weber 2014). Ensuing bad economic conditions would, then, have prompted a decline in political support (Eichenberg – Dalton 2007).

H1: Levels of all diffuse political support indicators declined in both member state groups after the Eurozone crisis

The second hypothesis posits that the Eurozone crisis resulted in a negative relationship between specific support and European identity. This hypothesis tests the idea that European identity – that is, a kind of diffuse political support for a community – is contingent on the receipt of economic benefits. In other words, it suggests that it is only when member states have a beneficial relationship with the European polity that their people develop a sense of belonging to the collective. According to this logic, the crisis made this relationship less profitable and therefore negatively affected the sense of collective identity in both the old and new member states. Furthermore, this hypothesis aims to establish the relationship between evaluations of national and EU economies and European identity.

H2: A negative relationship arose between specific support indicators and identity in both the old and new member states after the Eurozone crisis

The third hypothesis seeks to confirm Easton's thesis and establish the interdependence of diffuse support for the regime and the political community. The inference here is that political evaluations of a regime (see Table 1) have a profound effect on European identity. Moreover, this relationship is thought to be independent of any crisis or date of EU accession.

H3: Democracy and trust have a positive impact on European identity

The fourth hypothesis considers the media's effects on identity by drawing on the malaise concept. According to this thesis, people who are heavily exposed to TV news coverage become more cynical, have less trust in political institutions and are ultimately less positive about politics. This hypothesis attempts to ascertain whether the malaise concept rings true and in fact affects the sense of European identity.

H4: Using TV as an information source has a negative effect on European identity.

As we have seen, the counter-concept to video malaise is media mobilisation (Newton 1999), which asserts that media exposure is associated with trust rather than mistrust in political institutions. Based on this media mobilisation theory,

my final hypothesis posits that people's main source of information is the media and that this access to a greater scope of information helps them to become more aware and empowered to align with or support a given political structure.

H5: The scope of information accessed through media consumption has a positive effect on European identity

In order to investigate these hypotheses, I carried out an analysis of secondary data. In the following section, I outline the design of this study and various data attributes.

Study design

The secondary data which form the basis of this study were obtained from four different Eurobarometer surveys (63.4, 65.2, 80.1, 82.3). These surveys were carried out in 2005, 2006, 2013 and 2014 respectively. The rationale for the choice of two different time frames was to expose changes in different types of political support before and after the crisis. It must be emphasised that while Eurobarometer surveys are conducted multiple times every year, not every survey is based on the same questions. My analysis therefore only included those surveys that contained all of the variables required to operationalise the relevant constructs.

As has been noted, my focus was on both the old and the new member states. The relevant classification was made based on the date of each country's EU accession. In particular, countries that became members as a result of the 2004 enlargement were considered new members while the pre-2004 EU members were treated as old member states. Three current members, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, did not join the EU as part of the 2004 enlargement, acceding instead in 2007 in the case of Romania and Bulgaria and 2013 in the case of Croatia. Because of their different accession dates, these three countries were not included in my analysis. The final classification of member states, thus, put France, Belgium, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, the UK, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, Spain and Ireland in the old member states group. In contrast, the new member states group consisted of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Operationalisation of the variables

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study (European identity) was operationalised using the prompt "Please tell me how attached you feel to the European Union", with respondents being asked to apply a scale from 1 (not attached at all) to 4 (very attached). This prompt sheds light on the subjective identification of individuals with the collective and has been used to assess European identity in several studies (Bruter 2005; Fuchs 2011; Schafer – Weber 2014).

Independent Variables

There were several independent variables in this investigation, and each one corresponded with a specific construct. The first variable related to media consumption and was tested using the question “When you are looking for information about the European Union, its policies, its institutions, which of the following sources do you use? 1 – Meetings, 2 – Discussions with relatives, friends, colleagues, 3 – Daily newspapers, 4 – Other newspapers, magazines, 5 – Television, 6 – Radio, 7 – The Internet, 8 – Books, brochures, information leaflets, 9 – Other, 10 – Never look for such information, not interested.” Since the study is only interested in video malaise, I included only those respondents who selected “television” as an information source on European politics. This approach was further justified by the finding of many scholars that print media positively affect political attitudes (see, e.g., Newton 1999; Norris 1996) and malaise is mostly linked to television consumption.

The second independent variable referred to the effect of media mobilisation on European identity. This was operationalised using the question “To what extent do you think that you are informed or not about European matters?” Respondents were asked to evaluate their level of information using a 4-point scale: 1 – not at all informed, 2 – not very well informed, 3 – fairly well informed and 4 – very well informed. It is important to highlight the rationale for testing the media mobilisation hypothesis in this way. This question clearly does not itself afford the media any role in acquiring information, and its adequacy for gauging media mobilisation may, thus, be challenged. In response, however, I would argue that information about EU matters is usually acquired through the media, and as such, this question can be used to assess the effect of media mobilisation on political support.

Two additional indicators, satisfaction with democracy and trust, were used to evaluate diffuse support for the regime. Feelings about democracy were measured using the question “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the EU?” with answers provided based on a 4-point scale: 1 (not at all satisfied) 2 (not very satisfied), 3 (fairly satisfied), 4 (very satisfied). Trust was assessed using the prompt “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in the European Union. Please tell me if 1 (you tend not to trust) or 2 (tend to trust it).” Since both trust and democracy refer to a single political object, i.e. the regime, the two variables are highly correlated. To avoid multicollinearity in the ensuing regression analysis, I therefore created an index by calculating the mean result for the trust and democracy variables. Importantly, before the amalgamation of these two indicators, the satisfaction-with-democracy variable was recoded into two values, i.e. satisfied and not satisfied.

Based on the political framework set out by Easton (1965), specific support reflects evaluations of incumbents. In line with this approach, I used two indicators related to perceptions of the national and EU economic situations to

measure specific support. I tested for these two indicators using the question “How would you judge the current situation in each of the following [locations]?” with the following options supplied for answers: 1 – very bad, 2 – rather bad, 3 – rather good and 4 – very good.

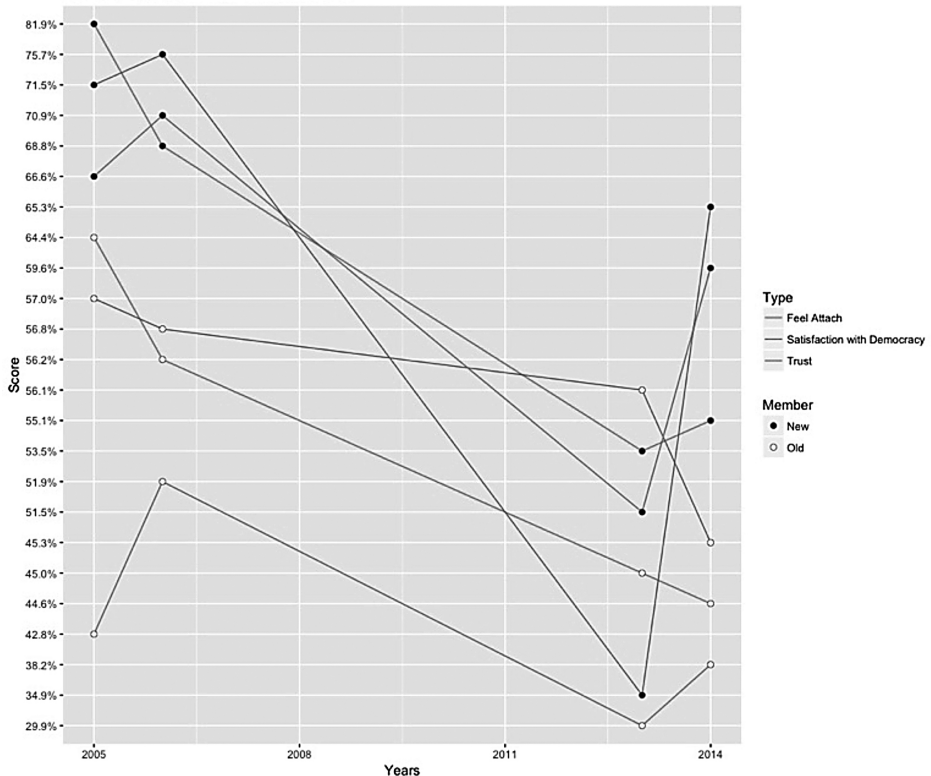
Control Variables

The analysis included a set of sociodemographic control variables. These concerned the age of the respondent; their political views based on their self-placement on a spectrum of 1 (Left) to 10 (Right); and their education (number of years spent in education).

Data analysis

Below I describe and explain the findings of the secondary data analysis which was conducted to test this study’s hypotheses. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive picture of the different political support indicators among both groups of countries before and after the crisis.

Figure 1: Diffuse political support levels in both groups before and after Eurozone crisis



The first hypothesis had assumed that all forms of diffuse support for the EU declined after the Eurozone crisis and that this decline was independent of the classification of any given member state. Figure 1 confirms this assumption, showing a decline in all three indicators of political support after 2006, with support for the EU falling to its lowest level across all member states in 2013. It is also worth noting the sharp decline in the levels of EU attachment and satisfaction with democracy and trust in the EU across the new member states. A similar downward trend can be seen among the old member states though the difference between these political indicators before and after the Eurozone crisis was not as pronounced as it was among the new member states, especially between 2006 and 2013. Importantly, this picture began to change after 2013 when people again extended their support to the EU for its successful handling of the economic crisis. This strengthens the idea that political support is very much related to economic benefits.

In order to verify the assumptions of the other hypotheses, I conducted a multivariate regression analysis. The results are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Multivariate regression results

		2005	2006	2013	2014
	R Square	0.17*** (n=13803)	.23*** (n=15232)	.12*** (n=19229)	.32*** (n=18537)
Old Member States	Level of information	0.06***	0.07***	.23***	.15***
	EU info source - TV	0.05***	0.04***	0.08***	0.3***
	Trust & democracy	0.34***	0.38***	0.02**	.46***
	Evaluation of national economy	-0.006	0.14***	0.03**	-.03***
	Evaluation of European economy	.10***	0.07***	0.15***	0.12***
	Age	0.09***	0.05***	-0.03***	-0.003
	Political view (Left/Right)	-0.05***	-0.02**	n.a	0.00
	Education	0.06***	0.03***	0.03**	0.04***

New Member States	R Square	0.06*** (n=3620)	.12*** (n=2712)	.13*** (n=4623)	.40*** (n=4376)
	Level of information	0.09***	0.06**	0.22***	0.16***
	EU info source - TV	0.04*	0.008	0.08***	0.05***
	Trust & democracy	.16***	0.30***	0.03	0.47***
	Evaluation of national economy	-0.01	0.06***	0.01***	0.06***
	Evaluation of European economy	0.06***	0.01	.15***	0.12***
	Age	.12***	0.03	-0.05***	-0.04***
	Political view (Left/Right)	0.01	0.009	n.a	0.00
	Education	-0.02	0.03	-0.005	0.01

Note: Significance level of each variable ** < 0.05; *** < 0.001. Dependent variable: level of attachment

The second hypothesis had assumed a negative relationship between specific support indicators and European identity especially after the Eurozone crisis. The hypothesis stemmed from the assumption that people support a given polity based on the associated costs and benefits. As such, it was argued that the Eurozone crisis had altered the existing beneficial relationship, subsequently affecting political support. The results presented in Table 2 do not, however, entirely support this view. In fact, these results indicate two very important points about specific support and European identity: the first is that there was a positive relationship between people's evaluations of the European economy and their sense of European identity among both the old and the new member states. In contrast, the second finding suggests that assessments of the national economy did not greatly alter the sense of attachment to a European identity. Returning to the hypothesis, we find that only the results of the 2014 national economic evaluation revealed a small but significant negative relationship with European identity among the old member states. For the remaining time, both indicators were positively associated with a feeling of attachment to the EU. Overall, then, these results reinforce the importance of economic growth for the development of a sense of identity in this political community.

The third hypothesis had aimed to test the association between perceived levels of democracy and trust and a sense of European identity. As expected, the relationship between these indicators of diffuse political support was positive and significant. While the results showed that this relationship weakened in 2013 for both EU groups, in 2014, both democracy and trust saw their strongest (positive) correlation with the dependent variable throughout the observed timespan.

As regards the media effects hypothesis, the assumption had been that the receipt of information via TV led to cynicism about the polity and a subsequent malaise effect. Moreover, it was proposed that the malaise effect had been amplified during the Eurozone crisis; in other words, not only was there a negative relationship between obtaining information through TV and a feeling of attachment to the EU, but that this negative association grew stronger after the crisis. The results, however, did not support this assumption. Indeed, these findings revealed a fairly minor but still significant positive relationship between people's TV consumption and sense of European identity. Rather than affirming the malaise effect, then, the results endorsed the fifth hypothesis, indicating that relying on TV for information about European politics does not make people cynical. Instead, it makes them feel more attached to the EU.

Conclusions

Two concepts have been the primary focus of this study: the framework for political support and the different effects of the media on political support. To this end, I have adopted David Easton's notion of political support and applied my own and Fuch's (2011) modifications to align it with the mandate of this investigation.

As a next step, I performed a secondary data analysis using Eurobarometer surveys from 2005, 2006, 2013 and 2014. The results of this analysis yielded some important insights. The first of these was that the Eurozone crisis affected political support for the EU, thus pointing to the significance of the economic benefits that countries derive from EU membership. At the same time, however, the results revealed the marked dependence of collective EU identity on the existence of satisfaction with democracy and trust in the EU. This implies that people's relationship with the EU is not simply based on a costs-and-benefits analysis; rather, they expect the Union to be democratic and trustworthy (Schäfer – Weber 2014).

The main goal of this study has been to understand the effects of the media on European identity, attending to both the possibilities of media malaise and mobilisation. The results of my regression analysis corresponded with those of numerous studies that have found that media consumption is not linked with malaise effects (Norris 1996; Newton 1999; Bennett – Rhine; Flickinger – Bennett 1999; Strömbäck – Shehata 2010).

To the contrary, my findings revealed a strong mobilisation effect. This allows for the deduction that the more an individual relies on the media as a source of political information, the more politically savvy they will become. Consequently, they will adjust their attachment to a given political entity based on the information they receive about it. Drawing on all these findings, the following table provides an overview of the hypotheses that have been confirmed or rejected by this research.

Table 3: Output for all hypotheses

Hypothesis	Confirmed	Rejected
H1: The level of all diffuse political support indicators declined after the Eurozone crisis for both member states groups	•	
H2: Specific support indicators had a negative relationship with identity across both old and new member states after the Eurozone crisis		•
H3: Democracy and trust have a positive impact on European identity	•	
H4: Using TV as an information source has a negative effect on European identity.		•
H5: The scope of information accessed through media consumption has a positive effect on European identity	•	

Limitations

It is necessary here to acknowledge the limitations of the present study, the most important of which concerns the dependent variable. Specifically, the literature on European identity includes one school of thought that posits that “attachment” might not be exactly the same thing as “identity” (see, e.g., Bruter 2008). I agree partially agree with this position, however given that this approach is common in empirical analyses of European identity (Schäfer – Weber 2014; Westle 2012), I would maintain that identity and attachment are conceptually close to one another. Additionally, some scholars have agreed that the malaise effect is not easily detectable and that where it does exist, its impact is minimal (Wolling 1999) and can be detected by analysing media content (Newton 1999). The current study, on the other hand, is concerned with media *consumption* as a predictor of malaise, and this may be one reason why the results do not indicate the presence of any such effect.

All in all, this study adds to the existing literature concerning the effects of the media on political attitudes. It concludes that media consumption has a mobilising rather than a malaise effect on political support, especially when it comes to feelings of identification with a particular collective. This work also establishes that as time passes, people are becoming better informed about European politics and lending their support to the EU based on both economic gains and normative ideals. As far as the malaise effect is concerned, my research joins the existing body of literature that argues that media consumption does not make people cynical (Norris 1996; Newton 1999) and that even where malaise exists, it usually has a very minimal influence on political attitudes (Wolling 1999). For a better understanding of the malaise effect, I would recommend

undertaking further research on both media consumption and media content. One way of doing this would be to combine an analysis of specific media content with a survey of the frequency of this content's consumption by way of particular media. This approach would help determine whether the malaise effect can be seen in media content or media consumption or both. The recent Brexit decision of the UK public may offer a context for the investigation of how different pro- and anti-EU media content can change the direction of political support. Such research could explore the impact of media-induced malaise and/or mobilisation on feelings of Europeaness in greater detail and clarity.

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Local Elections as a Sphere for Forming Citizens' Political Identity

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Abstract: *The specificity of local elections supports the idea that there is significantly more chance of developing political identity at the local level. Given the social specificity of local elections, we propose three hypotheses with the aim of ascertaining whether (i) the greater significance of these elections, (ii) the specificity of their political programmes and/or (iii) the proximity of voters to candidates lead to a stronger sense of individual political identity. These hypotheses are verified from a comparative perspective by reference to local elections in Poland and Slovenia.*

Keywords: *local elections; political identity; politics; Poland; Slovenia.*

Introduction

The forming of an individual's political subjectivity in their local environment is linked to the development of their political identity. This identity concerns the parts of the individual's identity that display their political values and political beliefs as well as the categories of their political thinking. Forming this identity means searching for answers to personal questions such as "Who am I in this current socio-political reality?", "What political values are important to me?", "Am I part of the social environment?" and "If so, how?" It also means finding answers to socio-political questions like "Which political organisations/parties share my values/needs/motivations for taking action?", "Do these political organisations/parties represent the region's interests?", "If so, how do they do this?" and "Is this particular political organisation/party respected in the local context?" Additionally, a citizen's political identity takes shape in response to

questions about their political position: the political values they prefer, their political identifications and beliefs and the categories of their political thinking. Political identity is almost always associated with a group affiliation, showing how membership of a particular group can convey specific political opinions and attitudes. In some conceptions, identity is perceived as a state; it is *something* that an individual or a group has which ensures their coherence and distinguishes them from others. More often, however, identity is understood as a process. This approach allows for and stresses the changeable nature of identity. This does not mean that identities are volatile or unstable. Rather, it is the basis for a dynamic reading that points to the possibility of filling identity with different meanings and symbols and negotiating its content through interactions with other people, groups or the socio-political context. Identity, thus, becomes an effect of choices and different impacts. At its core is the answer to the question “Who am I?”, which determines an individual’s constancy and the coherence of their behaviour across different situations.

The contemporary social environment is highly labile and diverse, producing often changing demands and contexts in which individuals operate. As well as highly dynamic change, key characteristics of the social context are the variety and variability of options; a focus on short-term temporality; the changing importance of individual and social resources; and the dominance of a prefigurative culture, detraditionalisation and individual identity (“me”) over social identity (“we”) (Appelt 2005: 541). Social expectations that are constantly being modified and hard to predict produce citizens with a highly individualised identity and a poor sense of group identity. The role of regional communities in these processes is also reflected in identity transformations. Key concerns include the fact that within community networks, location loses its importance and is often illusory (Giddens 1991). Moreover, the rapid pace of change affecting nearly all spheres of human life make it difficult to find a sense of security in one’s environment that would have lasting value and promise a specific future. We must therefore ask whether deliberating on political identity is even worthwhile at a time when the constancy of identity is being questioned and the difficulty of finding stable, crystallised identities has been highlighted at both the individual and group levels. In contemporary politics, it is becoming increasingly hard to find lasting sets of political ideas and values as well as stable entities that represent those ideas and values.

The specificity of local elections seems to support the idea that political identity is significantly more likely to emerge and develop at the local than the national election level, and this forms the main thesis of this article. Given the social specificity of local elections, we also propose three particular hypotheses. The first holds that the greater significance of local elections generates a stronger sense of individual political identity. The significance of these elections is linked, for example, to their social importance and the motivations for taking part in

them as well as other incentives. In both Poland and Slovenia, local elections are often described as second-order elections, however these contests have recently become more important as the regularity of certain political processes and anti-political statements points to their role in forming voters' political identities. The second hypothesis states that the use of concrete political programmes leads to a more robust sense of individual political identity. Political messages based on hard-to-grasp values with which citizens only identify momentarily will only motivate them incidentally. In contrast, messages that raise issues that matter directly to voters, connect to their everyday lives and substantially explore their immediate social environment link the electorate more solidly to the political entity that will be responsible for representing their individual interests. The third hypothesis refers to voters' personal relationships with the politicians running in local elections and holds that the proximity of voters to a candidate generates a stronger sense of individual political identity. At the local level, politicians are on average more independent and less connected to political parties. The proximity and familiarity of candidates may activate a number of psychological mechanisms leading to the denial of content-based discourse.

We set out to verify these hypotheses from a comparative perspective by referring to local elections in both Poland and Slovenia. Poland and Slovenia joined the European Union at the same time in 2004 and have some similarity historically since both were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War, endured the trauma of the long period of communist rule and have been successful in the processes of democratic transition and consolidation. Of course, there are also substantial differences between the two countries, not least of which is the sheer difference in their size, both in terms of population and territory, and their distinct political systems and systems of local government. Nevertheless, Poland and Slovenia share some distinct features in the context of local politics, including the tendency of voters to distrust major political parties and their partiality for "non-political" candidates and lists.

Political identity

Identity encompasses an individual's beliefs, interests, needs, motives, values, way of thinking and criteria for making evaluations. At the core of identity is the answer to the question of who the person is. Within the community with which they identify, the individual also develops a sense of social identity, i.e. a "we"-identity formed on the basis of their perceived and experienced similarities with other people. This has some consequences for their sense of community, which emerges through cognitive connections with other people and identifications with their goals, values and principles of conduct (Jarymowicz 2000: 117; Turner 2000: 18). In local elections, messages that invoke a person's regional identity are important, highlighting a specific type of social identity. That identity is

also based on regional traditions, i.e. practices that refer to a clearly defined and delimited territory or region (location) and the specific social, cultural (symbolic), economic or even topographic properties that distinguish it from other regions (locations).¹ Most often, a fully developed regional identity is associated with pro-social behaviours aimed at maintaining traditions and bonds with the residents of a given place. Where the relationship is strongly emotionally marked, the belief that identity is endangered may lead to aggression or terrorist action, as exemplified in the Balkan conflicts.

According to Henry (2001: 49), political identity originates in certain features in each individual that enable them to develop a group identity. These include the capacity to reflect on issues, to negotiate and to identify oneself as a member of a group with specific goals and preferences. Henry argues that we can define political identity by reference to several factors: (a) the whole system of relations between citizens and institutions, including the behaviours involved, the form of political participation, the criteria for resource-and-cost allocation and how these are actually implemented; (b) the values and (rational and irrational) symbols on which collective narratives and any latent consensus are built and the justifications for allocating risks, costs and benefits; and (c) a reflexive combination of components (a) and (b). Political identity is, thus, understood in terms of a shared way of acting and thinking among a group of citizens with regard to political institutions and their operation. Mouffe (1992) strongly emphasises ideological elements, arguing that political identity is the effect of community members' internalisation of a political system in the form of concepts, feelings and assessments. Obviously, all this requires an appropriate level of competence and political knowledge, which both above mentioned authors relate to rational action theory. In particular, they assume that citizens should take part and be interested in politics and make decisions after thoroughly thinking over the interests of political entities.

For Markiewicz (2014: 82), political identity can be categorised by way of three models: (a) *hard political identity*, which is seen among the followers of certain political ideologies; this is fundamentalist in nature and involves self-identification through fighting and confrontations with others about particular ideas and values; (b) *programmed political identity*, which is typical among certain active politicians; this is the result of a party programme and need not be reflected in the politician's self-definition since they are only (re)presenting the programme publicly; and (c) *soft/blurred political identity*, which is typical of most citizens; this describes the occasional identity of someone who takes an interest in politics from time to time, particularly when making political decisions in referenda or elections; citizens usually choose their political orientation based on emotions and others' opinions.

1 Defined in this way, regional identity is also a specific kind of cultural identity (Szczepeński – Sliz 2010: 15–19).

The social specificity of local elections

Elections at the local level have a number of distinct features from a social point of view. On many understandings, these elections are of secondary importance. Reif and Schmitt (1980: 6–11) argue, for example, that there are at least two distinct planes of electoral exploration. The first describes nationwide (presidential and parliamentary) elections, which have a higher status given their systemic and social significance. The second plane covers second-order elections, including local and European Parliament elections. We can detect two determinants of this situation: (1) voter apathy that may be due, for example, to the holding of an excessive number of elections in a short time; as a result, these contests may undercut one another's importance and cause electoral passivity and (2) growing political polarisation that may be caused by campaign topics that are disconnected from the party mainstream or by the engagement in political games, e.g. attempt to focus on petty issues in order to weaken other candidates rather than pursuing real political action (Drachman – Langran 2008: 134).

As Reif and Schmitt (1980) point out, second-order elections are influenced by primary elections. After a primary election, voters may, for example, have the opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction in a second-order election. As Reif and Schmitt emphasise, in second-order elections, voters vote with their hearts far more often than they do with their heads. The “heart” is, however, subject to various emotions and moods that may increase voter volatility and prevent the crystallising of political identities.

Local elections provide a weaker mechanism for strategic voting, which is more important in national elections. Citizens' motivations for allocating their votes are, thus, different in these two systems. Significantly, in local elections, it is more important to stress regional affiliations than party preferences. To understand how an individual develops attachments and identifications with a given place, we need to consider the two psychological processes that underpin this relationship and make it stable over time. The first of these is the need to belong, which relates to needing to belong and be accepted by a particular group. A rewarding sense of one's group affiliation is a significant element of the social bond; Turowski (1995: 22) describes this in terms of group awareness, collective awareness and a sense of connection or solidarity. The second process concerns social identity, and here location is one of the basic indices. Bretherton and Fogler (1999: 26) emphasise that identity results from membership of social groups or the sharing of sets of norms and values among a number of individuals.

The minimal scope for strategic voting in local elections opens up a space for concrete campaign topics. Local politics is a critical sphere since it is about decisions that directly affect a person's life in the place where they live. This means that there is more room for initiating conversion in local elections. If the community's interests are to inspire individuals to act politically, then they must

become part of that person's subjective interests. Once the collective interest transforms into someone's subjective interest, they begin to attach more value to political action and the achievement of political goals tied to both subjective and collective interests. In an analysis of other studies, Skarżyńska (2002: 42–37) points out that the common interests of a community may become a subjective concern if the problem involves a small area (e.g. an immediate neighbourhood), is resolved in a specific time and is well defined. It is certainly easier for local authorities to apply this approach since their sphere of action reflects the immediate interests of individuals: their streets and playgrounds, their schools and parks. Topics raised at the national level are more general and distant from voters, and the effects of fulfilling electoral promises often only come years later. The problems raised in local campaigns tend to be significantly more concrete and closer to citizens' lives. What is more, this closeness means that voters have greater knowledge of these topics which they can then apply in their decision-making processes. If they identify with an issue, they can engage with the campaign by discussing matters with other residents, following election events and meeting with candidates. Based on the principle of reciprocity (Cialdini 2006), this engagement tends to lead to active participation in elections.

Being close to the issues can also help activate accountability mechanisms, which contribute substantially to electoral volatility. When the issues in elections are practical concerns that directly affect citizens' lives, voting can be tied clearly to the punishment or reward of particular entities, which is an integral element of retrospective voting. Because of the clear statement of specific promises during the campaign, it is significantly easier to assess the effectiveness of a candidate's actions as they are being carried out. The legitimacy of retrospective voting is often questioned on the basis that some skill is needed to assess an individual's situation at the micro-social level and the state of the national economy at the macro-social level. This theory assumes that citizens are able to assess the effects of authorities' actions retrospectively and then use that knowledge to decide how they will provide support (Turska-Kawa 2015: 238). This process appears to be far easier for voters at the local and regional levels. The issues are closer to their lives and more likely to be topical in the public domain, which will lead to some discussion about how election promises are being kept. When citizens make decisions without having deeper knowledge of a subject, they tend to base their reasoning on cognitive heuristics. This is a temporary source of support that is usually based solely on patterns that allow them to make a quick decision at little expense.²

2 There are three kinds of cognitive heuristics: availability (assuming that an event that comes readily to mind is highly probable), representativeness (comparing the situation to a typical scenario) and anchoring (applying opinions already heard from others to form one's views on a matter).

At the local level, voters are significantly closer to candidates, which leads to special motivations in elections. Both willingness to vote and vote allocation may be effects of the frequency of contact; in other words, the more often we meet a person, the more likely it is that we will have sympathy for them. These effects have greater weight when candidates are from our own neighbourhood, local community or professional circle. Depending on the specific problem, the impact may be temporary or lead to the replacement of substantive discourse with psychological closeness. What supports these relationships occurring at the local level, however, is the fact that party candidates often run as independents or as representatives of local or regional entities in local elections. Indeed, given some of the arguments raised above – the lower level of politicisation of local elections and the minimal scope for strategic voting and special identity-based motives – non-party candidates stand a better chance in these elections. The result is that they diverge from the party mainstream and discuss problems that are close to residents' lives. In departing from ideological issues and replacing them with practical concerns that are specific to the local community, they are, thus, responding to the various determinants of voter behaviour at the local level.

The case of Poland: greater significance and less politicisation

The year 1989 saw a transition within Poland from the party-based nomination to the free election of state authorities, one of the most important transformations of the Polish political arena (Zieliński 1996: 32). In the era of the People's Republic of Poland (1952–1989), voters did not have a real choice when it came to supporting candidates; they could only choose between those who had already been approved by communist authorities. The regaining of basic political liberties, especially freedom of political expression and the right to political association (Antoszewski 2006: 77), allowed for the emergence of entities that could foster stable political identities in citizens based on their values. In this section, we set out to verify this study's hypotheses for Polish local elections.

Significance of local elections

As has been pointed out, local elections are usually understood as less systemically and socially significant than national elections. In Poland, however, the classification of local elections as secondary is not so obvious given a growing body of work that shows that these elections are highly important. Research by Wojtasik (2010) has proven that the concept of second-order elections cannot be applied easily to Polish local elections. Reports by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS 124 2014) also emphasise that for the last few years, Poles have attached greater importance to local elections than to parliamentary or even presidential elections. In fact, as Marody (2010) argues, while most Poles

remain proud of their nationality, the state is no longer their point of reference and (state) authorities' decisions no longer drive their behaviour. Instead, they focus their loyalty, sympathies and interests elsewhere. These individuals believe that events in their neighbourhoods are important. They do not care so much about who sits in parliament since this is insignificant in their daily lives. They are also not concerned about whether authorities are respectful though, of course, they would prefer them to be efficient. This is clearly reflected in election turnout figures since 1998 which show stable voter turnout with an upward trend at the local level (1998 – 45.4%; 2002 – 44.2%; 2006 – 46%; 2010 – 47.3%; 2014 – 47.2) alongside unstable voter turnout for presidential elections (1990 – 60.6%; 1995 – 64.7%; 2000 – 61.1%; 2005 – 49.7%; 2010 – 54.9%; 2015 – 48.9%) and very low voter turnout for European Parliament elections (2004 – 20.9%; 2009 – 24.5%; 2014 – 23.8%).

It is interesting here to note the characteristics of individuals who consider local elections more important than national or European Parliament elections. A study by Turska-Kawa (2010: 328–347) shows that these individuals exercise their active voting rights more often and use opportunities to participate in decision-making about important issues for the country; they are more often members of certain organisations and show higher levels of motivation-related variables such as dispositional optimism and a sense of self-efficacy. Turska-Kawa's research also considered the variable of "religious practices". In Poland, religious practices play a significant role in people's positive attitudes to voting (see, for example, Marzec 2010 and Turska-Kawa – Wojtasik 2014). A Public Opinion Research Center study (CBOS 124/2014) carried out just before the 2014 local elections confirmed that those who attended mass services and religious meetings were more likely to express an intention to participate in local elections. At the same time, Turska-Kawa (2010) points to an interesting correlation: in her study, the people who engaged in religious practices tended to have lower levels of motivational variables such as dispositional optimism and a sense of self-efficacy. As religious practices are a kind of social activity, we might assume that the individuals who pursue them would have greater motivational resources. Turska-Kawa's work, however, reveals the opposite tendency: presumably, then, religious practices provide external motivation for those who fail to find an internal source.

Content of political messages

As we have seen, campaign issues raised at the national level are more general and distant from voters and the effects of fulfilling election promises often only occur years later. A Public Opinion Research Center survey (CBOS 66/2017) showed that two-thirds (66%) of Poles agreed that the actions of most political parties were unclear and it was hard to guess what they really wanted to achieve. Most respondents (64%) did not believe that the parties did their best to help

ordinary people. In contrast, problems raised in local campaigns are often significantly more concrete and closer to citizens' lives. Furthermore, this closeness means that voters know more about the issues and can apply this knowledge in a decision-making process that requires less political expertise than would be needed for abstract topics. If voters identify with an issue, they can take part in the campaign by discussing matters with other residents, following election events and meeting with candidates.

Local identity is a special issue in Poland. In particular, this identity reflects a choice made more or less consciously by individuals who wish to cultivate and maintain a bond with their locality and community. This, in turn, determines their way of life and a set of psychological attributes that affect their attitudes to everyday matters. Local political groups, thus, focus their activities on issues present in the life of each resident. Developing a sense of belonging is far easier at the local level since many aspects of that identification result from having been born and socialised in a particular area and community. Moreover, stressing local identity as a source of psychological wellbeing may be a panacea for the breakdown of opportunities for social belonging and the difficulties with social embeddedness which are effects of globalisation.

In Poland, bonds with a region are often developed by reference to national identity, as reflected, for instance, in declarations and demands for a desired level of autonomy. Regional identity is older than national identity, and the latter has often been associated with centralisation and the imposing of solutions that are harmful to individual regions but support the exercise of power in some distant capital. Two dimensions of national identity are usually analysed: its continuity and its distinctiveness (Bokszański 2005: 109–110). In Poland, local and regional organisations have applied three basic strategies in connecting their demands with national identity. The first, *regional autonomy* stresses these organisations' absolute identification with the region, as reflected in their efforts to ensure full regional autonomy. The Silesian Autonomy Movement (SAM) epitomises this approach. It is a non-partisan association that tries to combine tradition and modernity, calling for contemporary steps to regain the autonomy that Upper Silesia enjoyed before the war. This is, in fact, highlighted in the association's first legislative goal. SAM has proposed a number of amendments to the Polish Constitution that would establish the autonomy of the regions (i.e. as autonomous provinces with independent laws) through relevant legislation and so protect their cultural heritage. In contrast, the second strategy, *national–regional binarism* points out the sense in belonging to a nation and a regional community at the same time. The Kashubian-Pomeranian Association exemplifies this strategy. It is a socio-cultural organisation for Pomeranians and anyone else who identifies with the organisation's goals. These goals mainly involve promoting a popular initiative for the overall cultural, social and economic development of Pomerania and the cultivation and development of its

cultural specificity. The third strategy, *national dominance*, sees local identity as an aspect of national identity and treats the development of regional culture as a service to the state. This is the approach taken by the Podhale Residents' Society. The latter is one of the oldest and biggest organisations serving both native highlanders and supporters of the region who want to foster what is broadly understood as the culture of the mountain regions while supporting their economic development and helping to protect their natural environment. In this case, however, caring for this region does not mean separatism from the state as a whole; instead, it is a means of developing the nation (Turska-Kawa 2013: 35–51).

Depoliticisation of candidates

The latest study of the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS 66/2017) confirms a phenomenon that has been at work in Poland for many years: the very critical attitude of citizens to political parties. Furthermore, a comparison with similar studies carried out six and sixteen years ago shows that this trend is growing rather than declining. The vast majority of respondents (91%) in the 2017 study believed that political parties were responsible for the conflicts and turmoil in the country. Nearly as many people (87%) agreed that the parties were nothing but cliques of politicians whose only goal was to gain power. Four-fifths (80%) of respondents believed that party members were mainly motivated by personal ambitions. These attitudes are reflected in the levels of trust in leading politicians. A May 2017 survey (CBOS 59/2017) revealed that the mean rates for Polish respondents' trust in politicians were not high. Instead, they fell within a narrow range of +1.09 to -1.70, where the maximum value (+5) meant complete trust and the minimum value (-5) meant extreme distrust. Andrzej Duda was listed as the politician most trusted by Polish citizens while Minister of National Defence Antoni Macierewicz was the least trusted.

The consequences of this trend can be seen in a situation that is widespread in local elections in Poland: representatives of political parties run without a party affiliation, that is, as independents or the representatives of local entities. Indeed, as we have noted, this strategy improves their chances of election. Before the most recent local elections in 2014, nearly two-thirds of eligible voters stated that they would prefer to vote for candidates who were unrelated to any party in the municipal or commune council elections. The inclusion of a party endorsement in pre-election statements was only a significant factor for slightly over one-sixth of respondents (CBOS, 124/2014). These statements tend to depoliticise local elections. Furthermore, support for candidates unattached to any political entity has been increasing in each successive election (2006 – 50%; 2010 – 52%; 2014 – 65%). This pattern is even clearer in the case of the election of commune heads and town mayors. Before the 2014 local elections, two-thirds (67%) of eligible voters expressed a preference for independent

candidates; this was an increase of almost twenty percentage points from the result in 2010 (48%).

In higher-level (regional) contests, the preference for specific candidates is replaced by a focus on ideological positioning and the selection of candidates who represent the voter's most preferred party. In Poland, this trend is clear from the difference between the results of commune elections (usually won by independent candidates) and regional council elections in the provinces (where political party representatives tend to win) (Wojtasik 2013: 212–213). Where independent candidates dominate, this tends to reflect a focus in their programmes on voters' real interests and the popularity of these candidates in their local communities.

Citizens' critical position on political parties can also be seen in the drivers of voting decisions at the local level. In these elections, stressing a candidate's connection with the residential area is more important than any party references. In some of these places, local identities have been deeply embedded, having been institutionalised via movements and associations that connect local people permanently and not just during elections; in these cases, elections tend to reflect the stable support of voters for their representatives. The organisations in question create common goals and focus their members' attention on ideas and plans that are important to them because of their place of residence. When nominating candidates for elections, these groups often base their programmes on official lists of their current activities.

In places where a strong local identity has not yet been formed, elections are open to candidates who have more or less gained popularity based on their short-term achievements and rise to power through various roles and positions. Social support is more contingent and connected with current affairs coverage, the electoral campaign and candidates' ambitions. Voting behaviours are less the consequence of relatively stable values and needs, leading to volatility in terms of voter activity/passivity and voting preferences. In Poland, local identities are significantly less established in western regions of the country where returnees settled after the Second World War. In those areas, people tend to turn to political parties. In eastern regions, where residence can be traced back over generations, local identities are stronger and support for candidates from local movements and associations is significantly higher.

The case of Slovenia: local elections and the rise of “anti-politics”

Political parties first appeared in Slovenia in the second half of the 19th century and were mainly representative of two large (clerical and liberal) blocs and one minor (socialist) group. Such parties disappeared before the Second World War II and were even prohibited in the post-war period (Lukšič 2001: 37). There are only two identifiable periods in Slovenian history during which partisanship

has flourished: the early 1920s and the early 1990s (Lukšič 1994: 23). At the same time, an anti-party trend has been noted as a recent phenomenon in contemporary democracies around the world (Bale and Roberts 2002: 1).

It was only in the late 1980s and early 1990s that political parties were revived in Slovenia with the democratisation of political life, culminating in the first post-war democratic elections in the spring of 1990. The era of modern partisanship, thus, began in the early nineties. The end of the 1980s saw the formation of new political parties; at the same time, the old socio-political organisations, which had until then enjoyed a guaranteed monopoly as the organisers and leaders of all political interests and activities, were transformed into new political parties (Krašovec 2000: 23). At first, parties were based on the protection of the interests of specific social groups (through parties of peasants, intellectuals, pensioners, craftsmen, workers and so on) and they only later expanded their profiles to become political parties as we know them today (Lukšič 2001: 38).

During the years when Slovenia was seeking its independence, the newly established parties were primarily a vehicle for mass protest against the former regime and a means of striving for a more sovereign status for Slovenia. As such, they lacked more precisely articulated programmes covering the most important spheres of life. The consequence of this was a low level of ideological distinctiveness since the newly established political parties, though exhibiting great ideological differences, shared a single goal in whose name they were prepared to put aside their differences for some time (Krašovec 2000: 24). The Slovenian Constitution expresses relatively strong resistance to party politics and only mentions political parties in a negative context (Lukšič 1994: 26). Article 42 states that membership of political parties is forbidden to professional members of the police and armed forces. The Constitution takes a consistently liberal and anti-partisan position, including one article that states that members of parliament are representatives of the nation and “not obliged to follow any directions”. The drafters of the Constitution clearly realised that political parties existed and parliament would always be a partisan institution but they did not recognise the natural right of those parties to be included in the Constitution (Lukšič 1994: 27). Moreover, the apogee of Slovenians’ distrust of parties is the corporatist body known as the National Council (*Državni svet*). This body was supposed to remain beyond the influence of any political parties with candidates to be chosen by associations, social organisations, unions, professional chambers and universities, that is, by non-partisan organisations. Even so, half of its members, or twenty-two representatives, are individuals with local interests who are elected to the National Council each term and their names appear on party lists. As such, we cannot say that this body’s operations are absolutely non-partisan. Nevertheless, the National Council, like the President of the Republic, remains an entity warranting support and protection under

the Constitution if the latter is to prevent the parties' complete domination of Slovenian politics (Lukšič 1994: 28).

Krašovec (2000:26) states that a common problem for Slovenian political parties is their lack of structural connections to society, as can be seen from the public's negative responses to them. Although the Slovenian public strongly supported the pluralisation of political parties back in the early 1990s and communicated this position in some way through the 1990 plebiscite, trust in these parties began to decline significantly soon after the establishment of the multi-party system. Since 1991, the level of trust has plummeted; in 1991, 12.1% of voters had a high or moderate level of trust in political parties; in 1995, this description only applied to 4.5% of voters (Krašovec 2000: 26). If we compare these data with the most recent figures (SJM 2015), we see that the percentage of respondents who trust political parties has been in constant decline (slipping most recently to 2.7%) while the share of those expressing total distrust in political parties (68%) has been rising.

To some degree, distrust in political parties can be traced to the installation of parliamentary processes in Slovenia. After so many years of a single-party system, citizens are still not ready to accept parliamentary debates that publicly expose social controversies. Unfortunately, these controversies have not been interpreted in a spirit of democratic debate among dissenting opinions but as rows, and, hence, a view has emerged that parliament is an unnecessary institution while political parties are quarrelsome entities. It is this open display of differing interests, a situation otherwise typical in a developed parliamentary democracy, which has earned political parties a bad name. At the same time, political elites have also contributed their fair share to this situation, having insisted that any non-acceptance or dissent from their standpoints represents a personal assault and not part of the political debate. Indeed, the lack of trust in political parties can be seen as a consequence of the visibly egoistic and ideologically burdened activities of the political elites (Fink-Hafner 1997: 152).

In contrast, non-partisan candidates and lists have seen increased success, and in the following section, we outline this trend and the resulting demise of political parties in local politics. At the same time, we provide a more detailed analysis of the results of five subsequent local elections, with an emphasis on the (growing) success of non-partisan candidates and lists.

The rise of non-partisan players and the demise of political parties: local elections

Of the major differences that exist between national (parliamentary) and local elections in Slovenia, the most crucial concern the candidacy options of non-partisan entities and lists and these candidates' actual chances of being elected. The electoral system that is used for parliamentary elections favours established political parties. From the empirical evidence collected for all seven parliamentary elections carried out so far, it is clear that non-partisan candidates and

those on non-partisan lists have somewhere between zero and a slim chance of being elected. Since the country's attainment of independence in 1991, no non-partisan candidate has even come close to being elected to the National Assembly and, in addition, the number of these candidates has always been very small. Since 2008, there have, in fact, been no non-partisan candidates whatsoever (Haček et al. 2017: 201).

In contrast, the situation is quite different at the local level of government. In its mayoral elections, Slovenia applies a two-round absolute majority electoral system³ while in municipal council elections, both one-round relative majority and proportional representation systems are used depending on the size of the municipality (Kukovič – Brezovšek 2016: 76).⁴

We will focus our analysis on mayoral elections for which candidates may be nominated by either (registered) political parties or groups of voters. Non-partisan candidates may only run with the support of a group of voters, and the minimum size of this group depends on the size of the municipality where the candidature is lodged.⁵ This allows non-partisans to realise their candidate eligibility in a relatively undemanding way. Empirical data concerning local elections since 1994 strongly confirm this view: non-partisan candidates have been convincing winners of the last three mayoral elections with at least one non-partisan candidate running for mayor in the majority of municipalities. The number of non-partisans elected to mayor has risen sharply since 1998. Since the local elections in that year, most municipalities have had a mayor who was not nominated by a political party. Forty-three non-partisan mayors were elected in the 1998 local elections (across 192 municipalities). The figure was fifty-nine in the 2002 local elections (across 193 municipalities), sixty-six in the 2006 local elections (across 210 municipalities), seventy in the 2010 local elections (across 210 municipalities) and 115 in the 2014 local elections (across 212 municipalities).

Non-partisan candidates and lists have only been slightly less successful in municipal council elections. Here we may observe a significant difference between small municipalities (which use a one-round relative majority electoral

3 A candidate is elected mayor if they receive the majority of the votes. If no candidate achieves this majority, a second-round election is held between the two candidates who won the most votes. If several candidates receive the same number of votes, the second-round election candidates are selected by lot. The two chosen candidates are listed on the ballot according to the number of votes they received in the first-round election. If they received the same number of votes, the ballot order is determined by lot.

4 If a municipal council has between seven and eleven (incl.) councillors, its members are chosen via a one-round relative majority voting system. If the council has twelve or more councillors, the members are chosen via a proportional representation electoral system involving the use of preferential voting (Local Elections Act, Article 9).

5 When a candidate for mayor is proposed by a group of voters, they need to obtain supporting signatures from at least 2% of all voters that participated at the last local election; there must be no fewer than fifteen and no more than 2,500 signatures (Local Elections Act, Article 106).

system) and medium-sized and larger municipalities (where a proportional representation system with preferential voting is used). A non-partisan candidate or list may be proposed by a group of voters permanently residing in the relevant election district. This group must collect supporting signatures from at least 1% of all voters that participated at the last local election, provided that no fewer than fifteen and no more than 1,000 signatures are submitted (Local Elections Act, Articles 54 and 68). The results show that non-party candidates and lists are also an overwhelmingly important political force in municipal council elections. In the most recent local elections, non-party candidates and lists accounted for 29.2% of all votes cast while the most successful political party (the Slovenian Democratic Party) received 14.3% of votes. In fact, the success of non-partisan candidates and lists has been growing since the first local elections in 1994.⁶

Why are non-party candidates and lists successful?

When revisiting the local elections held to date in Slovenia, the question that inevitably arises is why non-partisan candidates and lists are enjoying increased success. Drawing on ongoing debates and empirical research, we can suggest at least three reasons for the relative success of non-partisan candidates and lists at the local level.⁷

First, at the national level, non-partisan candidates have had literally no chance of being elected to parliament given the existing electoral system with its explicit stress on the role of political parties. As such, the only viable way for them to realise their passive suffrage has been to stand as candidates in local elections (Kukovič 2016: 214). Second, we can detect a strong tradition of non-partisanship in Slovenia; put otherwise, Slovenian political parties have always attracted some sort of distrust or criticism (Lukšič 1994), and given the deepening economic and political crisis over the last decade, this negative reactions have reached new heights. Third, local elections are a more suitable venue for non-partisans realising their candidacy rights due to the narrower scope of these contests. Moreover, in local elections, voters opt for candidates who come from the place where they themselves originated and live, and so party

6 Non-partisan candidates and lists accounted for 22% of votes in the 2010 local elections; in the 2006 local elections, non-partisans received 19.9% of all votes cast. In both these contests, the most successful political party was the Slovenian Democratic Party, which obtained 18.7% of votes in 2010 and 17.3% in 2006.

7 It should be emphasised that the growing success of non-partisan candidates and lists is not an exclusively Slovenian phenomenon that might be tied to the peculiarities of the Slovenian setting; rather, it is a pattern that has been exposed elsewhere by many authors in their analyses. Writing on Finnish, Swedish and Romanian local elections respectively, Ylönen (2007: 7), Worlund (2007) and Enache (2011) find that voters' support for non-partisan lists has increased several fold in recent decades. Here we should also stress that non-partisan lists have not yet become a major political force in any of these three countries.

allegiances are not as important as they are at the national level. Non-partisan candidates' political programmes tend to be more locally-oriented: they are often narrower, more closely focused on the given locality and less ideological than the programmes put forward by political parties. It is also often the case that voters know candidates personally, especially in very small municipalities. Both the candidacy and election of someone not linked to a party can strengthen local residents' belief that they can actually exercise the right to self-government in their own municipality. In Slovenian local elections, it may, thus, be said that the only true and undisputed winners are the voters, who are showing over and over at the ballot box that they are dissatisfied with political parties and their management of municipalities.

Conclusions

In the current world, the rapid pace of life and demands for flexibility and mobility are virtually inescapable. In this context, "mobility" can be understood broadly in terms of a readiness to make changes (e.g. to one's way of life or place of residence). Flexibility is the ability to adapt to transitory and constantly changing conditions (Bauman 1998: 14). Change is, thus, one of the fundamental elements of contemporary human life. It requires adaptation and impedes the crystallising of stable identities.

Identity formation is based on a sense of individuality, that is, an understanding of what makes one person (or group) different from others. This identification may also refer back to the elements that remain constant in a dynamically changing reality. Space is not only a place of interaction or a backdrop to events but also an elementary component of identity. Affecting the ontological individuality of the person or community living in a specific area, identity finds legitimacy in the space of the community, with its landmarks and its significant references. This symbolic space strengthens the awareness of territorial belonging, which, in turn, provides the basis for the myths that formally and culturally integrate members of the community. Space is, thus, an integral element of local elections. This was the inspiration for our thesis that it is far easier to influence an individual's political identity in local than in national elections.

The aim of the article has been to verify the statement that local elections develop a person's political identity far more effectively than national elections do. We have also suggested three more specific hypotheses that underpin this study. The first hypothesis states that the greater significance of these elections leads individuals to develop a stronger sense of political identity. Research has shown that elections with greater systemic and social significance are significantly more likely to inspire voters and generate lasting interest and positive emotions (Drachman – Langran 2008; Reiff – Schmitt 1980). Interestingly, analyses from Poland suggest that voters are finding local elections increasingly significant so

the Polish example does not follow the classic model. Furthermore, individuals to whom local elections matter more than other elections have specific resources that are an important part of political identity and contribute significantly to democratisation. In Slovenia, voter turnout figures would suggest that the importance of elections is slowly diminishing. Nevertheless, as voter support mounts for so-called non-partisan candidates at the municipal level, the possibility of running for office with a realistic chance of election or at least casting a vote for a non-party candidate has hugely increased the significance of local elections and local politics for voters and voter identity. More and more local non-partisan candidates and non-partisan lists are gaining support and taking over political decision-making at the municipal level. Their success, as reflected in high rates of re-election, is influencing not just the political identities of the general voting pool but party politics at national level as voters channel their local-level experiences into expectations about the national sphere of authority.

Our second hypothesis states that the concrete nature of political programmes leads to the development of a stronger sense of individual political identity. Both the Polish and Slovenian examples show that election programme content at the local level is developed entirely differently to such content at the national level and the studies presented prove that voters actually expect this. Thus, we find that local-level messages make more and more concrete references to voters' immediate environments: the roads they use, their schools and playgrounds, etc. These issues are closer to people's lives and these messages help them engage in decision-making processes since they not only allow them to identify with the problem but also make them feel responsible for the solution. In both countries, local identity is being referred to more and more often in local elections, which is itself an ongoing sign of the human need to belong.

The third hypothesis concerns the relationship between voters and the politicians running for office and it holds that proximity between voters and candidates produces individuals with a stronger sense of political identity. In both Poland and Slovenia, there is growing criticism of political parties. This has created the space for a special bond between voters and "non-political" candidates, who bill themselves as the opposite of politicians (presented as people who do not care about ordinary citizens). Clearly, this is related to the fact that candidates usually come from voters' immediate environment; they are familiar and have the same problems, and thus, the same goals as voters. At the same time, these candidates lack any background in politics, which – given current trends – enhances their credibility. In Slovenia, empirical data about local elections since 1994 confirm that non-partisan candidates have been convincing winners of the last three mayoral elections with at least one non-partisan candidate running for mayor in the majority of municipalities. Furthermore, the number of non-partisans elected as mayor has been rising sharply since 1998. In Poland, research confirms that voters put significantly more trust in candidates

unrelated to political parties; these tendencies are apparent in both municipal/communal council and commune head/town mayor elections (CBOS 124/2014).

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REVIEW ESSAY

Democracy in East-Central Europe: Consolidated, Semi-Consolidated, Hybrid, Illiberal or Other?

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The countries of East–Central Europe (ECE) – and the Visegrád Group in particular – have been one of the most important concerns of critical comments and reviews in recent years. Reading West European mainstream media, it is easy to see that a fundamental distinction has been drawn between “old” and “new” Europe. This distinction puts so-called traditional liberal democracies, a group usually equated with the EU-15 countries, plus other “Western” countries without a post-Communist tradition (Switzerland, Norway and Iceland but also Malta and Cyprus) on one side. On the other side is the group of “new” democracies (post-Communist states of East-Central or Eastern Europe) based on their unsatisfactory or even failed democratisation. Central Europe is labelled “big, bad Visegrad” or “Europe’s dark heart” while a “clash of cultures” is said to be under way in the European Union between old democracies, who are defenders of European values, and anti-European populists from East-Central Europe with the Visegrád Group countries in first place.¹ These critics stress that East–Central Europe has clearly shown in recent years that it has not been socialised in European democratic values. The new democracies, they say, favour illiberal solutions and so on.

In this essay, I review five new books that analyse political developments in East–Central Europe – and particularly in the Visegrád Group – in the last or last few decades. These books are largely concerned with the preconditions and reasons for political instability and the growth of populism in East–Central Europe while some also focus on selected policies, especially “European” policies. In fact, while all five books analyse selected political actors, factors and issues

1 These quotes all appeared in a recent article in *The Economist*. See Big, Bad Visegrad (2016): *The Economist*, 28 January, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21689629-migration-crisis-has-given-unsettling-new-direction-old-alliance-big-bad-visegrad>(4. 10. 2017)

within one or more East–Central European countries, in all cases, their analysis is embedded in a broader “European” context. A second common characteristic of all five works is that they have been written in the German language (or, in one case, partly in German and partly in English). In other words, this review focuses on a “German” or “Austrian” view of East–Central Europe, that is, of the eastern part of Central Europe comprised of the Visegrád Group countries (i.e. of the neighbours to German-speaking Germany and Austria), and in one case, of the countries and regions of one of the EU’s new macro-regional strategies – the Danube strategy.

The authors of these works tend to take a multidisciplinary approach, combining political science, contemporary history, legal studies and regionalism as well as development studies. Two of the works (Heydemann – Vodička, eds. 2013; Ther 2014) provide a comprehensive analysis of East–Central European politics based on an in-depth review of democratic transition and consolidation processes and political developments in the region since the fall of the Iron Curtain. This analysis is either offset by a comparison with Western Europe (Heydemann – Vodička, eds. 2013) or forms part of a “pan-European” vision where the difference between West and East is overshadowed by the description, analysis and critique of neoliberal ideology as the “master narrative” for European reunification since 1989 (Ther 2014).

Another two of the reviewed books focus on (East–)Central Europe from a European perspective. Christopher Walsch (2015) has given his book *Aufbruch nach Europa* [Breakthrough into Europe] the subtitle *Sieben Beiträge zur europäischen Integration Ungarns seit 1990* [Seven contributions concerning Hungary’s integration into the EU after 1990]. In fact, these seven essays clearly go beyond Hungarian borders, presenting a mostly Central European/Visegrád Group perspective and position; Walsch returns particularly to the matter of further EU enlargement and the role of Central Europe in “socialising” the Western Balkans. As it happens, Walsch is also one of the editors of the collection *Strategie für den Donaauraum auf dem Prüfstand. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven* [Testing the EU’s Strategy for the Danube Region: Experiences and Prospects] (Bos – Griessler, – Walsch, eds. 2017). The latter work differs from the other four books in this review since its focus is selected areas of EU macro-regional policy. Nevertheless, it too develops an argument based on a Central European perspective, albeit one using a very different definition of the region.

Last but not least, I consider Helmut Fehr’s 2016 book *Vergeltende Gerechtigkeit – Populismus und Vergangenheitspolitik nach 1989* [Retributive Justice: Populism and Reckoning with the Past after 1989]. This work may seem unique in this sample since it concerns selected practices and actors related to retribution/transitional justice and de-Communisation in Central European countries. At the same time, Fehr presents his analysis as a critique of East–Central European politics, and I include his book here for this reason.

Born in 1945, Fehr is a German scholar with a background in linguistics, political science, sociology and philosophy. After the transition, he drew on his knowledge of Polish and – along with other activities – was a full professor of political science in Bielsko-Biała for ten years. Fehr’s analysis addresses three Visegrád countries (Czechia, Hungary and Poland) while also including the case of (East) Germany for a comparison. As he states in the book’s introduction, the goal is to analyse debates about the past in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary by reappraising the underlying discourses. The main issue for Fehr is “justice” (*Gerechtigkeit*) as this idea has been taken up in political and public discourses. Despite the clear emphasis on transitional justice in the first phases of the transformation, Fehr (2016) points out that “corrective” justice also supported efforts to include former rivals in the debate and the new regime (pp. 12–13). There were, he writes, two main objectives of the efforts to overcome the Communist past: forming new institutions and establishing the legislation needed to ensure historical justice based on de-Communisation. Among the most important responses, Fehr singles out the “thick-line” approach, finding a good example in the line drawn by Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. In contrast, he criticises the unlawful lustration carried out in Czechoslovakia even before the first competitive elections in May 1990.

Fehr also decries comparisons that equate “red” with “brown”, in other words aligning the Communist ideology and regimes with Nazi Germany and fascist regimes. Even so, he fails to make an argument addressing and refuting authors (not only politicians but also one respected social scientist) with a different opinion. Instead, he maintains that “in contrast with the criminal past of Germany between 1939 and 1945 where there was a clearly determined offender and network of victims, it is impossible to establish a ‘Communist regime’ based on the criminal activities of elite groups in power” (Fehr 2016: 8). “Real socialist” regimes, Fehr argues, drew on the support of the citizenry based on their normative approach to equality (p. 9). The Nazi regime, we might counter, also made use of the genuine support of citizens. I would add that while I fully agree with Fehr’s criticisms of yellow journalism about the past (p. 15), we should also take into account the tendency to relativise the Communist past that can be seen in contemporary East–Central Europe.

In fact, I’d suggest that Fehr’s critical position is too shaped by his stance on the East German situation and internal debates in Germany about the Communist past. Certainly, we can accept his thesis that de-Communisation was an emotional project of the first half of the 1990s (p. 35) while being less convinced that lustration laws reflected some principle of communal guilt (p. 37). Revisiting Czech lustration laws and knowing the practice, I would argue, for example, that lustration was very limited in the Czech lands, and in many spheres, these measures were barely applied. Certainly, it is true that from a political science perspective, the term “totalitarian” is used excessively (p. 42), with differences

in the types of pre- and post-totalitarian authoritarianism sometimes being ignored altogether (cf. Linz). Moreover, identifying “totalitarianism” with the “*nomenklatura*” (p. 42) is incorrect if we accept the fact that in countries like Czechoslovakia, an important number of the *nomenklatura* were pragmatic opportunists – the same individuals who are now state rulers (see, for example, of Robert Fico and Andrej Babiš). Generally, I would agree with Fehr’s criticism that East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) is often labelled “Stalinist” or a “totalitarian dictatorship” without any attempt to distinguish different eras of power (p. 53). On the other hand, we need to ask a simple question: can any of these eras be called something besides “undemocratic”? Unlike Fehr, I agree with the definition of the GDR as (pre-)modern. Certainly, it was not “no-man’s land” [*Niemandsland*] as Fehr claims (pp. 56–58), but rather – like any other Communist dictatorship – a “false state” [*Unrechtstaat*]. We can, thus, acknowledge the limited state sovereignty of Communist countries in East-Central Europe, which is fully comparable in my opinion with the so-called sovereignty of Slovakia in the period 1939–1944/45.

One of Fehr’s strongest arguments against equating Nazi Germany and the GDR is that while Nazi Germany ignored international law, the GDR promised to respect the results of the Helsinki process (p. 62). At the same time, we should note that though the GDR and other Soviet satellites officially signed the Final Act, they did so without any real preparedness to respect it. Again, I would point out that the political practices of the GDR and Czechoslovakia – not to mention the sultanic regime in Ceaucescu’s Romania – were in all important respects undemocratic while the behaviour of the secret police and other pillars of these regimes was totalitarian until at least the mid-1980s. While Fehr rejects the description “terrorist state” for the GDR, we should recall that the GDR engaged in state-organised terrorism along with Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

Putting this aside, Fehr perfectly captures and describes the connections between de-Communisation and national populism, especially in contemporary Hungary and Poland: on one side, he writes, there was a common “we with the mandate of the entire people, and on the other, the red monolith” (p. 17). Turning to contemporary discourses in Hungary and Poland, he detects a “brutalisation of political rhetoric” (p. 26), noting that key words like “compromise” and “dialogue” have been rejected. In Poland, we may observe a new wave of de-Communisation led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Jarosław Kaczyński. The latter politician is, in Fehr’s view, the “inventor of de-Communisation as a theme for conflict” (p. 19). Analysing the “illiberal democracies” in Hungary and Poland, he finds a “nationalist populism” that originated in the interwar period (p. 7). Current national conservatives, he says, hold that “thick-line” politics brought a pink dictatorship instead of a red one (p. 29) and so they call for the “restoration of the state” and the “creation of a just nation” (p. 30).

As regards the most important paradigms informing this national conservative “revolution” in Hungary and Poland, Fehr names moral revolution, re-traditionalisation and anti-modernisation. In contrast, the Left, liberals, intellectuals and old networks have been demonised (p. 25) along, of course, with the EU and other transnational activities and structures including the general principle of globalisation. Conservatives, Fehr writes, maintain that the national interest can and should only be realised within the nation state – that bastion against Europeanisation and globalisation – and that “we cannot speak about democracy without the nation state” (p. 67). On this view, “[j]ournalists and liberals do not have any loyalty to the nation state” but are agents of some fifth convoy (p. 68). Brussels is also said to be overridden by leftist elites while the EU is likened to the former Soviet Union (p. 68). It is worth singling out the rhetoric of Kaczyński, who stresses the “colonial laws” of Tusk’s Poland and the “German dominance” of the EU (cited in Fehr, p. 111); Poland, he claims, is the last defender of truth (p. 69). Prime Minister Orbán takes a similar line vis-à-vis Hungary, combining this rhetoric with a more traditional casting of Hungary as a victim (p. 86).

Observing the Polish debate, Fehr suggests a master narrative of injustice [*Ungerechtigkeit*] may be at work (p. 67). The leaders who preceded the Kaczyński brothers are, thus, dismissed as “Solidatura”; only PiS, it is said, can bring real democracy to the country based on the “values of Christian Poland” (p. 69). Leftism does not reflect the “Polish spirit” (p. 22). Fehr here quotes Jan Parys, the leader of the Third Republic movement: “In Poland, there is no ‘normal’ Left, only the Left that collaborated” (p. 24)

Populism is rooted in reverence for the “common people” – the everyman and his representatives who are, as Fehr notes, said to be struggling against liberal, (post-)Communist, German, European/inised elites (pp. 68, 73). Both PiS in Poland and the Fidesz party that dominates Hungarian politics equate “liberal” with “cosmopolitan” and “freemason” where the latter is also a synonym for those of Jewish ethnicity. The leaders of national conservative movements and parties also make clear use of a highly problematic and seemingly extremist rhetoric, sprinkling speeches with terms like “racial mix” (Polish Foreign Minister Waszczykowski) and “liberal scum” [*Lumpenliberalismus*] (Kaczyński).

The anti-intellectualism, anti-Communism and anti-liberalism described by Fehr (p. 27) – intellectuals are apparently all liberal and leftist – are accompanied by calls for a loyal and patriotic media and reverence for the people, “who remain above the law,” as Kornel Morawiecki of the Kukiz-15 movement puts it. (The law, he has said, “is important but cannot be sacred and must serve the people.”) National conservatives are, thus, building an ethnically homogenous nation that pits itself against minorities and other nations based on a politics of resentment. At work here are a blatant xenophobia and his-

torical stereotypes about neighbouring countries, which are condemned as “German agents”, “foreign influences” and “journalists funded from abroad”. Meanwhile, minorities are branded potential collaborators with the enemy. Poland’s nationalist Catholic elite have, thus, claimed that “Jews have always been alien to us” and even more startlingly, “Jews betrayed us and handed us over to the Soviet occupiers” and “[a]n Israelite cannot be a real Pole” (c.f. Pufelska cited in Fehr 2014:142)

As Fehr painstakingly shows in his analysis of the 2012/13 Czech presidential campaign, the national conservative movement can also team up effectively with leftist populists in some countries. Throughout the campaign, Miloš Zeman was billed as a “genuine Czech” in a showdown with the “non-Czech” Karel Schwarzenberg, who even had an Austrian wife (p. 121). National conservatives, Fehr stresses, here play the same cards that the Communists relied on before the transition: “In both Poland and the Czech lands, hatred of the Germans was the Communists’ last hope” (p. 114). Obviously, such populist politics is at once pragmatic and irrational and paranoid. The paranoid style of politics on display in Poland and Hungary stresses the dangers posed by “liberals”, “cosmopolitan elites” and “banking circles” (or “New York”) while Czech President Zeman and many other Central European politicians appeal to public anger about migrant arrivals (this is despite the fact that there are almost no migrants in any of these states besides Hungary). In the case of Poland, Fehr also specifically addresses the role of President Lech Kaczyński’s death in a plane crash, noting how this “myth of Smolensk” complements traditional conspiracy theories.

The brutalisation of political language has introduced terms like “witch”, “killer”, “agent”, “devil” and “traitor”. Kaczyński, Orbán and Zeman, Fehr notes, rely on a politics of inferiority complexes (p. 141) and fear (p. 145). Both Orbán and Kaczyński discount guarantees of human and civil rights as merely ideological. In contrast, populism is a good thing – and Orbán, who sees himself as a “good populist”, observes: “In Hungary, we call things by their real name. This is part of our natural history” (quoted in Fehr, p. 149). This “common sense” is contrasted with so-called political correctness, an alien concept brought in from the West.

Fehr’s analysis concludes with his own round of name-calling: the politics of Central European national conservatives, he notes, is “plebeian” and aimed at the masses of former country-dwellers. Again he quotes Orbán: “We Hungarians are a nation shaped by agriculture.” Fehr is clearly highly critical of the Polish and Hungarian national conservative parties and his analysis provides ample evidence for this take on their anti-liberal and generally anti-democratic attitudes. At the same time, he does not proceed – and it was not his goal – to explore the reasons for the de-democratisation trends in these countries or more generally in East–Central Europe. That task is, on the other hand, taken up by another work, Phillip Ther’s comprehensive *Die neue Ordnung auf dem*

alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa [The New Order on the Old Continent: The History of Neoliberal Europe] published in 2014.

Ther, who was born in Germany and teaches at the University of Vienna, specialises in modern, contemporary and comparative history with a focus on East–Central Europe, particularly the Visegrád Group countries. At the same time, his work has important applications for other East–Central European countries and Russia. This approach is rooted in Ther’s own background, as becomes clear in the book’s first chapter, which describes his experiences and emotions as a young man living behind the Iron Curtain. As a specialist in contemporary history and sociology, Ther sets out to analyse the reasons for the “European crisis” that erupted after 2008. His hypothesis is that neoliberal responses to the weakness(es) of the (Western) welfare state fell short – and continue to fail us – and that this has produced or exacerbated deep-seated problems and cleavages in Europe/the EU. At the same time, Ther’s analysis is anything but a one-sided critique of neoliberalism; for a classic case of the latter, we might mention the work of anthropologist Loïc Wacquant (2010; 2012) (for a critique of Wacquant, compare, for example, Cabada 2014).

Instead, this account begins with a basic question: “Could the state be overburdened by all the social benefits it is meant to deliver?” (p. 11). Oil crises and subsequent developments in the West have revealed deep problems in the welfare state that are mainly due to the gap between societal expectations and the funds available. This disjunction has led to an expanding and – and in some European countries – seemingly intractable problem with growing public debt. In examining the situation, Ther also considers the countries behind the Iron Curtain: “The Eastern bloc missed the digital revolution, and some countries (Yugoslavia, Hungary) also faced problematic foreign debts” (p. 41). Economic – and more generally development – problems are, thus, diagnosed as an important cause of changes in Eastern Europe. As Ther writes, Poles, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks who could travel were quick to notice the lack of proper development in their countries compared with the West (p. 43).

Turning to the period before the transition, this book also shows how the West used the *détente* years to develop new economic relations with the East. Of course, the joint venture activities of Western firms in Eastern Europe (including French firms in Romania and various investors in Hungary) were already observable in the 1960s, but it was really during the 1970s that this economic cooperation became more systematic. During the *détente*, the West saw the opportunity to take advantage of a cheap and well-educated labour force in the Communist countries – Austria was extremely active in this regard but so too were Sweden and others. In Ther’s view, this was a chance for slow reform. This may be the case, especially if we take into account that economic and developmental failures had negative consequences for an important section of the *nomenklatura* who were often caught up in the grey or even black economies

of their countries during the regime change.² Ther does mention this quest to secure new positions in these transforming systems (p. 44), but he does not address the *nomenklatura* methodically.

By the same token, it would have been useful to consider some of the political science debates about differences among the Communist states – Of note here, for example, is the outstanding work of Herbert Kitschelt and colleagues (1999), who provide a taxonomy of patrimonial, national-accommodating and bureaucratic-authoritarian Communisms. In my view, applying this taxonomy to the issue of West–East economic cooperation and its role in dismantling Communist regimes would have revealed that this premise is only valid for some Communist countries and does not hold, for example, for sultanic Romania. To compare a non-European example, the development of Kaesong industrial park has not helped open North Korea up to the world or led to any relaxation of its regime.

Nevertheless, I would fully agree with Ther’s point that reforms were expected and began across both halves of Europe in the 1980s (pp. 47–48). I must also concur that the “crisis in the East was ‘invisible’ and this included the horrible environmental situation” (pp. 50–51). And Ther is right to stress the importance of anti-Russian nationalism both within and outside the USSR (p. 53). There are, however, some regional differences that might have borne closer examination: while in the West, the 1980s saw a clash between neoliberals and supporters of a broad welfare state (including both “socialists” and more general supporters of a social market economy), economists in the East were trying to combine a limited market economy with the Communist ideology. Ther’s account suffers from the lack of any discussion of the role of the Prognostic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which was established in 1984 and has since been criticised as a leading Communist tool for reform without democratisation. Employees of the Institute included such names as Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman, Valtr Komárek, Vladimír Dlouhý, Tomáš Ježek, Karel Dyba and Miloslav Ransdorf – all of whom besides Ransdorf became members of post-1989 governments and two of whom went on to be the Czech Prime Minister or President.

There is, however, absolutely correct that after 1989, the post-Communist region became a laboratory for neoliberal economic policy. With some exceptions – Slovenia under Drnovšek and Czechoslovakia in the first two years of the transition – the concept of a “third way” was, as he notes, rejected (p. 13). Packs of Western neoliberal economists quickly descended on East–Central Europe (p. 32) and also found supporters in domestic arenas. As Ther captures so well, the success of these “Eastern Thatcherists” was also based on the clear

² It is worth highlighting the excellent analysis of Czech sociologist Ivo Možný, whose seminal 2009 volume *Proč tak snadno... Některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce* [Why it was so easy... Some familial reasons for the Velvet Revolution] exposed the extent of the Czech *nomenklatura*’s interests.

failure of Communist reforms in the USSR, Poland and Hungary (p. 55). Ther rejects the idea that this neoliberalism was entirely mistaken, instead maintaining that the Western welfare state needed – and still needs – at least partial reform. At the same time, he cites examples which show that alongside the mistakes and failures, the economic transition had some very positive results for East–Central Europe. No one, he argues, was in a position to assess these processes “definitively”, and there have been many important shifts in the evaluation of the transitioning ECE states. In the beginning, Hungary and the Czech Republic were seen as exemplary, however this later changed and Estonia and Poland became the more positive case studies. We might add that Slovakia is now often championed as another positive example whose macroeconomic indicators should soon equal if not outdo those of the Czech Republic. Promoters of a common EU currency might also point to this development. Certainly, I would agree with Ther that the relative success of East–Central Europe became apparent shortly before the 2004 EU-enlargement: in 2002/2003, several ECE countries had better economic results than some of the poorer EU-15 countries.

In my view, however, the highlight of Ther’s book lies in its chapters that address the differences between metropolitan areas and the countryside. Ther has an excellent shorthand for both his hypotheses and the results of his analysis: “[r]ich cities, poor countryside” (p. 20). The gap between the “winners” and “losers” of the transformation clearly reflect this split, as Fehr has also noted. Ther’s comparisons, however, reveal usefully that the disparity between the economic development of urban and rural areas was not specific to East–Central Europe – and a growing regional and social divide could also be seen in the West. At the same time, he argues that Southern Europe is the new Eastern Europe. In both regions, the post-2008 crisis has hit country dwellers much harder than city residents. For Ther, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe have not overcome the rift between the centre and the periphery that exists across Europe; rather, the harsh neoliberal economic transformation of East–Central Europe has only deepened the divides in post-Communist as well as many other European countries.

A similar view can be found in several of the essays written by Christopher Walsch (2015). Walsch’s academic background is very similar to that of Ther, and he also studied modern and social and economic history and then pursued international relations and European and development studies. The Austrian-born Walsch has been active for more than a decade at various academic institutions. His book logically brings together a number of his essays about Hungary, reflecting on the country through three different levels of analysis: domestic, Central European and European. Like Ther, Walsch begins by observing that Central Europe lagged economically behind in the 1970s and especially the 1980s. The term “Central Europe” (*Zentraleuropa*), it should be stressed, is used carefully here and mostly refers to the Visegrád Group countries plus Austria

and Slovenia. Commemorating the unwritten agreement between the Czechoslovak political elite and these societies after the August 1968 occupation, he describes the region as a “happy barracks”. Following this regional analysis, Walsch’s focus shifts to Hungary’s “goulash capitalism” and the transition to a market economy. This analysis deftly captures how both left- and right-wing parties and governments have been plagued by growing budgetary debt; the result has been an economic populism based on increasing financial promises to the public in exchange for votes. New governments have, thus, repeatedly stopped long-term reforms and awarded radical wage rises to the public sector; they have repeatedly found new forms of economic populism (the introduction of a national pension age of just 56 is one example.). In Walsch’s view, the main problem with the Hungarian transition – and the country’s politics in general – lies in the lack of any consensus. Like the accounts of Fehr and Ther, his argument highlights the significant cleavage across this society.

In the space of the next four essays, Walsch presents an analysis of Central European politics and selected policies over the last 25 years. This begins with a comparison of the Central European/Visegrád cooperation with similar format arrangements (Benelux etc.) and proceeds to an analysis of Visegrád Group’s development, including examples of the cooperation’s successes and failures across selected policy areas. Among the priorities for this cooperation, Walsch names energy policy and security, the Eastern Partnership and further EU enlargement based on the ongoing support of the Central European countries for the aspirations of Western Balkan states. Interestingly, this analysis sees the Visegrád Group as a band of confident countries who are offering their experiences with Europeanisation and socialisation processes to EU-membership candidates. This confidence would seem to be at odds with the oft-mentioned problems with democratic consolidation in some ECE countries. Still, it is certainly true that Western Balkan countries are more likely to resemble other new democracies than West European countries. Walsch highlights the very specific “V4+” format that has been used to create ad hoc coalitions of ECE states. The most important case of this cooperation is, he notes, the “group of friends of cohesion”, which formed during the negotiations of the 2014–2020 EU budget. Walsch’s observations can be linked here with Ther’s emphasis on the creation of this group from countries on the EU’s periphery, i.e. not only states in the East but also those in the South. Walsch concludes this interesting collection of essays by setting out ten theses concerning Hungary’s Europeanisation. The majority of these stress the importance of democracy, consensus, civil society, education, the division of powers and similar norms. In other words, Walsch calls for the (re-)establishment of liberal democracy in the country.

The idea of Central European cooperation is also taken up in another work to which Walsch has made an important contribution. Specifically, he is the co-editor with Ellen Bos and Christina Griessler of a recent book addressing

one of the EU's new integration and development tools: macro-regional strategies. Most of the articles in this collection focus on the EU's Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) as an example of the new regionalism based on constructivist approaches. On the other hand, several chapters take a more traditional approach to Central Europe and even ask whether these perspectives are complementary or in competition. The EUSDR includes two southern German republics, Austria, three Visegrád Group countries (Poland is notably absent), Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, three candidate states from the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) as well as selected regions of Moldova and Ukraine. In this sense, it really is a new, functionalist development. The book's contributors consider why the EU has launched this new strategy (the answer lies in the limited success of existing regional and cohesion policy). They also ponder what this new activity means for differentiated integration across the EU (Boglářka Koller offers an excellent analysis) and how it might support existing regional cooperation in Central Europe (Walsch) and the Western Balkans (Griessler). Having outlined these regional and European perspectives, the book turns to several comparative studies of already launched or currently prepared macro-regional strategies in the Baltic region and the Alps; there are also policy analyses of mainly economic issues and cooperation. All in all, this collection offers a slightly different take on the analysis of Central European politics, with a clear emphasis on new challenges and opportunities. A good balance is struck between top-down and bottom-up perspectives, and it is fascinating to see the "return" of the Central European Initiative (CEI) as the main platform for a new functionalist style of cooperation that goes behind the Iron Curtain (the Alps-Adriatic Alliance, Quadrangolare and Pentagonale).

Finally, I would highlight a collection of analyses that was published in 2013 and edited by G. Heydemann and K. Vodička. Both these editors work at the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism in Dresden; it should be noted that Vodička left Czechoslovakia in the 1980s and became an exile in Germany. Since the collapse of the Communist regimes, his academic career has developed in both countries, focusing mainly on democratic consolidation issues. Among Vodička's key research contributions is the axiom that the former East Germany should be considered alongside the ECE countries, that is, that the new federal republics did not simply become Westernised after German reunification. It may be recalled that Fehr also included (East) Germany case in his analysis while Ther (2014) saw the former GDR as an area in transition (p. 28).

This volume edited by Heydemann and Vodička, *Vom Ostblock zur EU: Systemtransformationen 1990–2012 im Vergleich* [From the Eastern Bloc to the EU: Comparing System Transformations 1990–2012] brings to mind the excellent book series *Die politischen Systeme Westeuropas* [Political Systems of Western Europe] and *Die politischen Systeme Osteuropas* [Political Systems of Eastern Europe] edited by Wolfgang Ismayr which has appeared in many editions since

the early 2000s. Since addressing all of the case studies in this volume is hardly feasible, my comments here focus specifically on the objectives and results of this research. The editors start their introduction with a note that all these studies confirm the important and persistent differences between post-Communist countries and other countries. Heydemann and Vodička's view can be summed up in a single sentence: "Compared with established EU democracies, the democracies of the post-Communist EU space seem to suffer from a wide range of democratic shortcomings at the level of representation (virulent party systems), actors (a propensity for corruption) and civil society (weaker support for democracy and unpreparedness for political participation)" (p. 15). The two also note that Communist rule "destroyed the moral values of the pre-totalitarian period, deformed civic political culture and erased civil society" (p. 319).

Nevertheless, they remain positive about the current situation and the prospects for East-Central European countries based on their analysis. Heydemann and Vodička write repeatedly that the majority of the ECE countries who are new EU member states are now on a direct track to consolidated democracy. The point becomes clearer when they compare current and potential EU candidate states and other post-Communist states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region and Central Asia: "The populations of the new EU member states support democracy not just as a model but as a real system and they decisively reject anti-democratic system alternatives [...] Experts assess the post-Communist EU member states as consolidating democracies while all other former eastern bloc countries are seen as defective democracies at best" (Vodička – Heydemann 2013: 320). Certain other comments are, however, perhaps too optimistic given what has transpired in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic: "[t]he eastern EU states have already put the most difficult years behind them: in the social, economic and political arenas, we should count on predominantly positive developments" (Vodička – Heydemann 2013: 380).

It is worth recalling that East–Central Europe is not composed solely of Central European countries with illiberal tendencies; it also includes very promising consolidating democracies like Estonia and Slovenia. Conversely, there are many states in Western Europe where we may observe democratic shortcomings, suggesting that consolidated democracy may be more or less a norm that countries should tend towards. Certainly, I would agree with Heydemann and Vodička's (2013) position that the most important problem for the ECE states is "widening and even endemic corruption" (p. 378).

In sum, it is understandable that comparative politics scholars are continuing to search for differences between East and West. However, most of the books considered in this review show that European countries are facing very similar and common challenges and risks. Just how they respond may depend on very different divisions and preconditions than whether they belong to the "old" or the "new" Europe.

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