

Degrowth from the East – between quietness and contention. Collaborative learnings from the Zagreb Degrowth Conference

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ABSTRACT	<p>While degrowth as a plural and decolonial movement actively invites the Global South to be part of its transformative project, the current North-South dichotomy threatens to miss the variety of semi-peripheral contexts. Against this backdrop, we aim to contribute to dialogues on degrowth from the often-overlooked 'East' – specifically post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Instead of being viewed as a site for transformative examples and inspiration for degrowth-oriented socio-ecological transformation, CEE is often portrayed as 'lagging behind'. Problematising such reductionist narratives, this essay explores CEE as a lively and rich site of postcapitalist alternatives. Based on two special sessions organised at the 2023 International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb, we reflect upon insights gathered on various degrowth-aligned traditions and practices in CEE with a goal to 1) advance an equitable dialogue between the global degrowth scholarship and the East, and 2) strengthen a context-sensitive degrowth agenda in CEE.</p>
KEYWORDS	degrowth, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), quiet sustainability, semi-periphery, catch-up development, post-socialism
DOI	https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.838
PUBLISHED ONLINE	19 June, 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussion of degrowth has grown in academic, activist, media and policy circles (HICKEL 2023; KALLIS 2018; KING ET AL. 2023; MONBIOT 2021). Emerging principally in Western European academia and activism in the 1970s, this controversial ‘missile word’ (DREWS – ANTAL 2016) has moved during the last two decades from being a lesser-known ‘activist slogan’ (HANAČEK ET AL. 2020) to garnering discussion in mainstream publications and even the European Parliament (BEYOND GROWTH CONFERENCE 2023). As degrowth gains increasing influence and reach, it is important to reflect on how the concept travels across different contexts. With this paper, we consider the possibilities and limits of degrowth from the perspective of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a spatial/historical category and the ‘East’ as an epistemic and performative category (MÜLLER 2020).¹

Our understanding of post-socialism is based on the argument made by scholars such as Aradau (2024), who contend that besides being a spatio-temporal descriptive term² and a contested analytical dimension, postsocialism is also a situated experience and a method of inhabiting and productively exploring contradictions. As a method, post-socialism calls for attending to the *“messiness of the present and avoiding pronouncements of either rupture or continuity”* (IBID.: 3). Accordingly, our application of post-socialism in this contribution *“enables an exploration of socialist legacies on multiple scales, expanding beyond state socialism and the Communist International, and how these have (or have not) remained constitutive of contemporary radical and decolonial imaginaries of collectivity and political action”* (ATANASOSKI – MCELROY 2018: 277). While acknowledging that there are not only plural legacies of multiple socialisms but also vast differences within post-socialist CEE along various intra-European hierarchies, we apply the term as an exploratory method that intends to pluralise (and problematise) some of the tropes employed in degrowth discourse and related movements.

Our contribution draws inspiration from a conference session and workshop we organised (titled ‘Degrowth from the East’) at the 2023 International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb, Croatia. Our own collective positionality with this regard is hybrid and “messy”, as the East appears as a place of origin, residence and/or research in our biographies, which are, however, also intertwined with Western institutions, connections and/or

funding. As a group we thus seem to embody the in-betweenness associated with post-socialism: on one hand we are (at least temporarily) privileged as part of the academic class of the Global North ('insiders'), while on the other hand we remain 'outsiders' and embedded in our respective Eastern contexts. The same applied to most of the 30 participants of our workshop in Zagreb – many of the participants were from CEE but based in Western countries, but persons with an Eastern background based in CEE countries also made up a significant part of the group.

The Global North-Global South axis is a key point of departure for most degrowth discussions. It has been noted that most of the degrowth literature emanates from high-income, Western European states for whom degrowing their economies is a prominent topic (CABAÑA ALVEAR GABRIELA – VANDANA 2023; HANAČEK ET AL. 2020; WEISS – CATTANEO 2017). Beyond this, Gräbner-Radkowsch and Strunk (2023: 4) identify diverse debates regarding degrowth and the Global South in the current literature: the South is often identified and recognised as *"an origin of and inspiration to degrowth in the North"*; degrowth in the North is seen *"as a form of decolonization of the South"*; and degrowth *"also applies to the South in the sense that the South should not follow Western development paths and (continue to) resist growth-based capitalist development"*. More critically, however, question marks remain over the applicability and resonance of the term in Southern contexts, or even the neocolonial implications of a movement driven by Northern scholars and activists displacing local frameworks and cosmovisions (DENGLER – SEEBACHER 2019).

So where does CEE fit in this schema? While there has been a promising evolution towards including non-Western knowledges in degrowth theorising, this has tended to reinscribe the dominant North-South distinction that sidelines much of the world (KOTHARI ET AL. 2019). In their review of literature on degrowth and the Global South, for instance, Gräbner-Radkowsch and Strunk (2023) include a study undertaken in Croatia, though whether this approach is adequate is by no means clear. When Hanaček et al. (2020: 9) discuss degrowth 'from the margins' and the need to go beyond Eurocentrism, they admit that Eastern Europe is barely present in the degrowth literature. If the South has increasingly provided case studies and borrowed concepts for degrowth, then it is clear that the same cannot be said for the East (CHERTKOVSKAYA 2019; GEBAUER ET AL. 2023; KOČOVIĆ DE

SANTO – DOMPTAIL 2023). As Müller (2020: 740) writes, “*unlike in the South, people have not found in the East a cause for compassion, global activism or a source of alternatives to neoliberalism [and] environmental destruction*”. The East has fallen ‘between the cracks’ (IBID.: 735) in terms of epistemological visibility and remains stuck in this in-betweenness socially, economically and politically. This diagnosis condemns the mainstream Western-dominated analysis and public discourse of invisibilising yet again the critical analysis that Easterners themselves produced about post-socialist crises and their global connections (GAGYI – SLAČÁLEK 2022).

While knowledge from the core sets the agenda, research from the East is often deemed only relevant to context-specific ‘area studies’ and, as such, “*continues to be excluded from [...] circuits of cosmopolitan knowledge production and communication*” (JEHLIČKA 2021: 1219). A process of invisibilisation and exclusion has been noted, for instance, with regard to practices of ‘quiet sustainability’³ (SMITH – JEHLIČKA 2013) in the peripheralised East, which are often overlooked in favour of more explicit environmentalism and frameworks set in ‘core’ contexts (JEHLIČKA 2021). Similar arguments regarding geographical biases and the overlooking of CEE in the literature have been made in relation to urban theory, sustainability and climate change (FERENČUHOVÁ 2016, 2020; PUNGAS 2023). The East is marginalised or ‘othered’ as grey, uninteresting, backward, inferior, and non-modern, and as a perennial learner and a region of shortage (MÜLLER 2020; CIMA – SOVOVÁ 2022).

With respect to ‘provincialising’ knowledge production but also advancing the degrowth agenda on an equal footing, the following three key aspects of CEE states demonstrate the necessity to thoroughly engage with CEE contributions to the degrowth activist scholarship: i) the expert knowledge of various stakeholders – including practitioners – on the ground; ii) the experience with an alternative economic system and the subsequent transition; and iii) a specific position(ality) of liminality in terms of identity and world politics.

Firstly, the region’s history as a diverse hot-bed of neoliberal but also simultaneous non-capitalist economic experimentation underlines the importance of the respective ecological movements and reproductive economies in (post-)socialist states (GILLE 2007; JACOBSSON – KOROLCZUK 2020; SARRE – JEHLIČKA 2007). This lived experience of Eastern activist-intellectuals but

also practitioners on the ground makes them *experts* with valuable practical knowledge that can be used in the degrowth transformations that they aspire towards (PUNGAS 2024). Johanisova et al. (2013) were perhaps the first to forge a contemporary link between degrowth literatures and CEE in their study of eco-social enterprises and degrowth in Czechia (SEE ALSO DANĚK – JEHLIČKA 2020). More recently, Domazet and Ančić (2019) demonstrated that a ‘passive degrowth’ attitude is prevalent in Croatia: “the specificities of systems of values and beliefs recorded in Croatia and the European semi-periphery [...] show a potential alignment with a democratic shift to post-growth oriented societies”. Meanwhile relevant cases have emerged in scholarship examining Estonia (PUNGAS 2024), Romania and Bulgaria (VELICU 2019), Hungary (STRENCHOCK 2021; SZÁKAL – BALÁZS 2021), Poland, Armenia and the former Yugoslavia (KOČOVIĆ DE SANTO – DOMPTAIL 2023). From such work, it becomes clear that diversity is the rule, not the exception, and that differences in socio-political systems, histories and cultures require more nuanced approaches.

Furthermore, as in the cases of other semi-peripheries, the East’s relation to global capitalist development has been conflictual, as it was torn by internal tensions between those promoting modernisation projects in the hope of benefitting from them, and others who rejected them for their costs. This has been the case for socialist development too, the specific characteristic that set the Second World apart from other global semi-peripheries, and granted it its status of a great power and political adversary. The collapse of socialism, while happening largely along the same lines as the debt-driven crises of African and Latin American import substitution industrialisation regimes, had a particularly symbolic impact. Globally, it seemingly confirmed that there is no alternative to neoliberalism. Locally, it induced a crisis of self-identification which many now argue has aggravated the suffering of the transition crisis (E.G. HOLMES – KRASDEV 2020); (for a discussion of “change fatigue”, see) (MAU 2019). The grand erasure of the East from global narratives of progress has temporarily succeeded in making the memory of socialism as a real existing alternative system disappear. However, as the ecological crisis makes the search for alternatives ever more necessary, questions regarding the historical significance of state socialism, its ambivalent heritage, and the experience of neoliberal ‘Europeanisation’ as destruction of socialist reproductive infrastructures, are becoming relevant to global debates.

Finally, the East remains “*too different to be included in the North, [and] too European to be included in the South*” (MÜLLER 2020: 740). The position of CEE within, yet at the margins of, Europe, enables this region to provide valuable insights that neither the Global North nor South has experienced. For instance, far from being simply ‘othered’ victims and passive recipients of Western-prescribed norms (as often claimed by critical scholarship), CEE national actors did hold various forms of agency and did exercise power in shaping the post-socialist era along with its nationalist and neoliberal institutions (ARADAU 2024: 6). Indeed, the concept of neoliberalism itself, rather than simply being imported from the West, was co-developed by economists, politicians and activists from both the Global South and CEE (BOCKMAN – EYAL 2002; CONNELL – DADOS 2014).

Given this context, we note the importance of recognising the specific histories, fears and preferences present in CEE that influence how transformative approaches like degrowth ‘sit’ in such contexts. While degrowth’s prominence in Western discussions may serve as a source of justification of the concept for local movements in CEE which try to raise the topic in public debate, it is crucial that degrowth does not become another subject of catching-up with the West, as previously happened with ideas like civil society and the market economy after 1990 (GAGYI – SLAČÁLEK 2022) or ‘alterglobalisation’ in the 2000s (GAGYI 2014). We view degrowth not as one ‘solution’ or totalising system, but as a framework which always needs to be related to the local context. Context particularly affects how criticism of capitalism and growth is perceived in CEE (for instance, advocates of degrowth might summarily be dismissed as ‘Communists’, as they would be associated with the prior authoritarian regimes). Furthermore, as the region has extensive negative experience with forced collectivisation and state-controlled cooperatives, in CEE the collective organisational forms favoured in the degrowth literature suffer from a legacy which taints the people’s willingness to countenance cooperative economic forms to this day (JOHANISOVA ET AL. 2020). This reminds us again of different legacies of multiple forms of socialism and calls for a pluralistic, context-sensitive lens.

Post-socialism as a method enables us to explore precisely this pluralism along with its potential contradictions. Holding space for this tension and carefully examining the contradictions opens the way to reconstruct them into productive and inclusive opportunities that would

pluralise our option space for pathways towards degrowth. While (semi-) peripheral countries are often portrayed as fodder for extractive capitalism, we supplement this by asking how they can also be lively sites of postcapitalist alternatives. We approach this inquiry as engaged scholars who, rather than merely observing and describing these dynamics from a neutral point of view, strive to support the degrowth agenda in CEE in ways which consider and fit the local context.

The following discussion draws on dialogues between the authors and the participants of the workshop and thus represents a partial viewpoint on the degrowth debate in CEE, identifying possibilities for further discussion and research. Following this introduction, the piece is structured around four framing questions (Sections 2.1–2.4) which guided our process, and which were drawn from the theoretical contributions presented during our conference session titled ‘Degrowth from the East’. This is then followed by a discussion (Section 3) which derives some general conclusions as well as recommendations for further degrowth practice and agenda in CEE. The four questions we set out with were:

1. How do we cultivate common languages and understandings around degrowth in the East?
2. How can we counteract and overcome notions of catch-up development in CEE?
3. Which practices that exist or have existed in the East are potentially relevant for degrowth futures?
4. How can we build bridges and alliances between the degrowth movement and degrowth-aligned practitioners on the ground?

2. REFLECTIONS FROM THE ZAGREB CONFERENCE ON ‘DEGROWTH FROM THE EAST’

For the sake of facilitating a group discussion, we chose the world café method to structure the interactive session.⁴ We had two rounds of parallel conversations (with each table addressing one of the four respective questions) hosted by a facilitator and a note-taker. Each participant was thus able to choose two of the four questions and share their views on

them by discussing each one in a small group for approximately 20 minutes at the respective table. We opened the workshop with a brief plenary introduction, and concluded by harvesting key take-aways from each table, which were reported to the whole group. In what follows, we summarise and reflect on the results of the four respective group discussions (2.1–2.4).

2.1 Cultivating a Common Language

During the sessions in Zagreb, language took centre stage as a tool that can both connect and separate at the same time. While we appreciated the opportunity to be inspired by the scholar-activist debates on degrowth at the Zagreb conference, this also begged the question of whether the specific language used in regard to degrowth might be one of the obstacles to reaching more people in the CEE region. The session started with the question “How do we cultivate common languages and understandings around degrowth in the East?” as we were concerned with identifying a common language for degrowth around which activists, practitioners and organisations with different backgrounds could find a shared understanding. However, the conversations at this table led us to rethink this framing. Rather than seeking commonality or unity in a shared language, the participants’ contributions re-considered the value of embracing a diversity of vocabularies undergirding degrowth practices. This recognition stems not only *literally* from the diversity of languages used in the East, but also from examples in which the use of language separates rather than assembles members of possible alliances. Early during the workshop, for instance, one participant reported the friction at a previous degrowth gathering where degrowth was immediately seen by activists from the ‘West’ as positively aligned with ‘communism’. Given that the understanding of communism in the East is tightly connected with lived experiences under the oppressive rules of Communist parties, such a rhetorical move served to distance rather than bring together potential allies. This was observed even amongst activists from the East who strongly sympathise with the concept of degrowth.

This input advanced the assumption that the degrowth vocabulary might be in need of diversification and that the existing pluralism in degrowth debates, as well as the interest in the philosophies, vocabularies and practices in the South (KOTHARI ET AL. 2019), should be likewise applied

to the East. There can be no claims to strategies or vocabularies that perfectly align with each other across different contexts. Rather, context sensitivity should be the starting point. The participants said that this would first require a form of genuine listening and learning from the East as a way to enhance or diversify the vocabulary – as illustrated by one participant's ongoing work in revaluing the 'forgotten stories of yogurt' (MUTLU SIRAKOVA 2023) in Bulgaria and Turkey. While valuing diversity was arguably the most prevalent theme at this table, it also touched upon further dimensions that are worth reflecting upon. As these topics emerged during a flowing conversation, there is no claim that these dimensions cohere harmoniously. Rather, we acknowledge the tensions between these strategies and encourage further examination concerning their compatibility.

How could a recognition of diversity (and perhaps a proliferation of new vocabularies) be supported and achieved in practice? The discussion indicated that degrowth principles might be particularly relevant to specific communities in the East which in their everyday life are engaged in a variety of degrowth-aligned practices or civic engagement (see also Section 2.3) despite a) not always being well versed in English (the language in which most degrowth-related publishing and discussion take place); and b) often being marginalised or operating under certain financial insecurities. Integrating such groups into degrowth debates would be aided by a material commitment from degrowth scholars and activists to consider allocating resources (e.g. funding, organising accessible spaces and meetings, translation) as a means to support such groups. This would enhance the possibility of hearing a diversity of voices in more equitable dialogues, as well as mitigating the risks of appropriating the visions and practices of others. The issue of appropriation not only concerns taking symbolic credit for other initiatives' or communities' practices but also includes the possibility that scholars, operating in 'a bubble', apply degrowth labels to communities which might seriously question this label. The key questions which arose here were the following: While frugal lifeworlds are widespread in the East, should they be identified as degrowth-aligned practices? Might they be underpinned by altogether different motivations? Is it more appropriate to view them as the product of a larger history of enclosing the commons? What would be the political effects of misrecognising social exclusion as degrowth?

With the call to be attentive to Eastern voices, however, the conversation turned to challenges which can arise with this strategy. In particular, a question arose around the possibility that the radical potential of degrowth to imagine and enact possible futures is jeopardised by including an even broader spectrum of voices. Admittedly, this broadening might even have adverse performative effects, contributing to what one participant termed ‘degrowth-washing’: that is, using the increasing normative appeal and prominence of degrowth as a way to legitimise questionable practices, initiatives and projects in the East (or elsewhere). Negotiating this will become paramount as not all vocabularies related to practices of low energy throughput and resource extraction in the East should be termed as (a voluntary, self-chosen) degrowth. This matches with wider tendencies to stretch degrowth to a questionable extent: With the term degrowth increasingly cropping up in the corporate sector, it can be seen how low-carbon trajectories might be compatible with continued capital accumulation and exploitation of wage labour, thus contradicting the specific aim of degrowth, namely to imagine convivial, just futures.

Finally, as developmentalist visions are particularly powerful in the East, the workshop participants also pondered the risks and possibilities of re-appropriating semantic fields while imbuing them with degrowth significations so as to leverage wider audiences and foster unlikely alliances. Concepts such as ‘innovation’ might be appealing even though they are also filled with connotations related to catch-up development in Eastern contexts (see Section 2.2 for more on this debate). To what extent, then, is it desirable to imbue such concepts with new, degrowth-inspired meanings (SEE ALSO PANSERA – FRESSOLI 2021; SATTTLER 2024)? The concern here is not only about importing terminologies from elsewhere (e.g. social innovation, circular economy) and thus keeping the mastery of the North in place. Rather, the discussion made it clear that it is more appropriate to listen to, make visible and revalue existing languages and practices in the East, and start a conversation about whether the current signifiers of such practices (such as ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’, say) are simply a reflection of symbolic power differentials. Such framings can further marginalise knowledge systems due to their association with the past. Such knowledge systems clearly evolve over time, adapting to changing climatic, political and cultural conditions (KIKVIDZE 2020), thus pointing toward more ecocentric and convivial futures. Resignifying such practices as innovative *might*

open space for new alliances and economic interventions: New options for policy-making, or leveraging financial resources as a means to nurture degrowth practices, may then also emerge.

2.2 Overcoming Catch-up Development

The semi-peripheral position of CEE countries, along with their geographical proximity to the Western European core, makes for unique dynamics of economic development. While the imaginary of historical delay or backwardness is common to all ‘developmental’ contexts, here the coveted result is (seemingly) within reach, a border away – it just requires a little sprint to join the peloton. In the context of post-socialist crisis, deindustrialisation and marketisation dependent on Western investment, efforts to ‘catch up’ have dominated CEE’s economic policies and imprinted themselves on people’s self-perception. Therefore, the discussion question at this table was ‘How can we counteract and overcome notions of catch-up development in CEE?’, referring to the struggle of becoming ‘one’ with Western Europe via quickly boosting economic growth and implementing pro-market policies. The abrupt transition from a socialist, centrally-controlled economy to liberalised markets came to be known as ‘shock therapy’ (GHODSEE – ORENSTEIN 2021) and resulted in a variety of post-socialist versions of capitalism (BOHLE – GRESKOVITS 2012). In this context, catching up gained a geopolitical as well as economic significance: the promise to overcome the economic gap was tied to a return from ‘Eastern’ state socialism to ‘Western’ market democracy, and claiming a rightful place within the European core.

This catch-up narrative dominated regime changes (LONG 2005) and enjoyed a lasting hegemony despite the social pain and rupture of the transition. In this process, catching up and the promise of Westernisation took over the heritage of opposition movements, (see more about the concept of “post-dissent”) (FEINBERG 2022), downplaying their socially critical elements as a mere tactic to overthrow socialism. Ironically, current opponents of degrowth in CEE associate degrowth with the former regime rather than with the opposition movements which set a radical subversive agenda. Critical scrutiny of developmentalism is therefore key to reinterpreting the heritage of socialism, its opposition movements, and the whole post-socialist period.

The post-socialist catch-up narrative is problematic in several ways. Throughout the table discussion, there were expressions of critical reflections that are structured here into the following six central points (which are also established in the respective literatures):

First, the ‘catch-up’ narrative pictures development as a temporal rather than a context-specific and relational characteristic. Instead of individual countries undertaking autonomous developmental paths at different speeds and in different directions, the global interaction between countries and their diverging development stages impact the countries through policies and trade. Accordingly, this means that convergence on the European, let alone on the global level, may be an illusion (HOFBAUER – KOMLOSY 2000; MÜLLER 2020).

Second, CEE is not a homogeneous block as there are internal cores and (semi-)peripheries in it. As such, an analysis at the level of a region or even a country may be misleading. Aggregate data will typically conceal local injustices, with the pursuit of a catch-up trajectory easily backfiring specifically in these internal peripheries (PÓSFAI – NAGY 2018). Furthermore, countries differ in their geographical and symbolic distance from ‘the West’, which means that some of them enjoyed a head start in the race.

Third, the catch-up narrative (re)constructs an older socialist identity that is supposedly ‘underdeveloped’ and a new ‘developing’ one to replace it. This ‘doing away’ with the old selves in the East is rooted in a process of self-colonisation and can dangerously reduce all economic, cultural, and social legacies to outdated remnants of a totalitarian past (ANNUS 2017: 88; LOTTHOLZ – MANOLOVA 2023).

Fourth, in the ‘catch-up’ narrative, there is no consideration for the Global South and its own right to development. CEE’s claim to a place in the core is thought to be backed by history and should thus have precedence over that of non-Europeans (KALMAR 2023). While catch-up development is not necessarily a racist project from the outset, it is prone to supremacist interpretations whenever there is a conflict between the interests of Eastern Europeans and non-white others (NICOLESCU 2023).

Fifth, identifying CEE as a part of the core that is simply lagging behind, and deploying core-like policies, may result in selective blindness towards and (unintentional) crowding out of various good practices on the ground (SEE, E.G., PUNGAS 2023). According to this logic, the West is promoted as the universal place to learn from, while the East (and the ‘Eastern’ practices along with it) is (are) perceived and treated as something to be overhauled (JEHLIČKA 2021; MÜLLER 2020).

Sixth and lastly, the very notion of ‘development’ stems from a problematic assumption about the universality of the Western-European economic and cultural model, and is rooted in the colonial dynamics of pushing other countries to follow the same trajectory as Western Europe (ZIAI 2015).

It is clear from the above criticisms that catch-up development can easily turn into a societal split between *and* within CEE countries (CHIROT 1989; BOATCA 2006). Internal peripheries often remain left behind when they bear the negative impacts of development (social, environmental), but gains primarily flow to the internal cores. Conversely, people in the internal cores may feel that others are not making a sufficient effort to catch up and are thus slowing down the whole project. Both of these frustrations are bound to escalate if the catching up takes longer than originally envisioned.

The case of Hungary presented by Gagyí (2016) was brought up in the discussion as a model illustrating such divisions within post-socialist countries. It describes the political ideologies of the two elite blocks that dominated Hungary’s post-socialist development as a mirrored contradiction between anti-populist democratisation and anti-democratic populism. The first denotes a program of Westernisation based on market liberalisation, and carried out in the name of democratisation. When social groups hurt by marketisation express their grievances, they are dismissed as backward and non-democratic. Conversely, the competing elite bloc promotes protectionism and development through national capital. Politically, this promises to protect Hungarians from Western exploitation, unmasks the ideology of Western democratisation as economically oppressive, and supplants this image with the one of national development, obscuring differences in interests between domestic capital and domestic labour through references to organic national unity. While anti-populist democratisation internalises East-West hierarchies by downplaying domestic populations

as backward, anti-democratic populism uses the ideological promise to overcome this hierarchy only to reenact it in the form of oppressing local labour to enhance domestic capital's competitiveness.

One solution proposed in the discussion focused on a 'balanced self-confidence': avoiding both the notion of the superiority and that of the inferiority of the whole nation. This also means – and is conducive to – not concealing the political and economic contents of policies with narratives of the nation's historical role. An inclusive reflection on development policies and a societal debate on what the desirable future economy should be like (e.g. which particular sectors should grow or decline) are more empowering than the all-encompassing ethos of either catching up or preserving the national identity intact.

Another proposed emancipatory strategy was embracing some characteristics as culturally specific rather than viewing them as belonging to a lower stage of development. This might include self-provisioning or various infrastructures for collective needs satisfaction inherited from former regimes (more on this in Section 2.3) and it would counter the economic reductionism of one-size-fits-all development, allowing for a less prejudiced discussion about local specifics, habits or good practices.

Finally, describing some obstacles to development as structural rather than culturally determined or caused by insufficient effort can have an emancipatory effect. A structural analysis of CEE's integration into global capitalist processes can help us understand region-specific degrowth-compatible practices in their relation to the global economy, allowing us to compare them with similar practices elsewhere, and think strategically about expanding them. In this light, taking inspiration from and collaborating with the Global South seems like a worthwhile alternative that can be utilised while exploring CEE's own development pathways. This calls for widening and/or shifting the current focus a) from the Global North as a universal blueprint for development to global (semi-)peripheries and their rich practices of coping with and resisting dominant economic forces; and b) from nations as a unit of analysis to regions, communities, grassroots movements and single organisations as indispensable actors and possible allies in domestic political analysis and struggles.

2.3 Exploring Overlooked Degrowth-compatible Practices

Building on local experiences, rather than providing one-size-fits-all solutions, is strongly embedded in the ethos of degrowth. As the degrowth movement gains momentum in CEE, debates emerge about existing local practices which embody the ideals of frugality, sustainability and collectivism envisioned in degrowth futures. As such, the third framing question – ‘Which practices are potentially relevant for degrowth futures but are overlooked due to their association with the East?’ – offered a space for a collective inventory. The participants shared their experiences of the socialist era, of travelling in the region, and of navigating everyday life in the East today.

Do-it-yourself and food self-provisioning have already featured in literature discussing practices of ‘quiet sustainability’ and ‘inconspicuous adaptations’⁵ in the East (FERENČUHOVÁ 2022; GIBAS – NYKLOVÁ 2020; SMITH – JEHLIČKA 2013). Food self-provisioning in particular has come to epitomise a popular yet politically neglected contribution to sustainability (and possibly degrowth) by widespread and long-lasting traditions in CEE.⁶ Cultivating, foraging and preserving food provides joy and social connections while reducing dependence on monetised markets and increasing the consumption of local and seasonal food. Similarly, constructing, reusing, and repairing objects, infrastructures, and buildings reduces material throughput while increasing the lifespan of materials and providing opportunities for meaningful work. The workshop participants also mentioned sustainable travel in the form of camping and hitchhiking as a frugal practice that was widespread during socialist times and remains popular today.

While these practices predate state socialism and continue to thrive after its end, the socialist regime created – intentionally or not – a favourable ground for their consolidation. Difficulties in accessing consumption goods during socialism contributed to strengthening both food self-provisioning and do-it-yourself traditions, even though both have accommodated a wide array of needs in different times in history, ranging from subsistence and economic motives to self-fulfilment and creativity. Some socialist product designs remain models of aesthetics, practicality, affordability and long product lifespans even today, while organised collection points for spare parts and scrap material facilitated repairs and reuse.

Other practices directly promoted by socialist regimes also resonate with degrowth ideas, especially with regard to the provision of universal basic services (education, health, transport, and social security) and public infrastructure. Sufficiency and affordability were at the centre of socialist housing design as well as socialist urban planning, with facilities such as schools, transport links and recreational zones integrated into modular neighbourhoods. At the enterprise level, socialist companies offered not only employment but also leisure and recreational activities and various types of benefits (LIUHTO 1999: 14). Interestingly, some flagship capitalist companies today are revisiting this concept by integrating recreational activities for their employees into their programmes – albeit in a more commercialised way.

Conviviality and collectivism are at the core of another set of Eastern traditions, in particular the important (today as in the past) convivial moments that reinforce a sense of community and trust. These include community and family celebrations, country fairs, as well as collective care of people and the environment. Volunteer firefighter collectives and options for free-time activities for children and adults (e.g. forest theatres) were widespread in socialist times and often withstood neoliberalisation. The collective cleaning of public space and other similar tasks, known as *subbotniki* or *Action Z* (SEE CHASE 1989) emerged often as voluntary and bottom-up initiatives and were later formalised as top-down requirements through the structures of socialist companies. These activities had an equalising effect by pausing hierarchies for the duration of the work, as everybody would carry out the same tasks. In relation to collectivity, the greater tolerance towards nepotism and informality in the East was also discussed during the workshop. Western readings that frame the importance of personal connections in social organisation immediately as clientelism or corruption might prevent one from seeing these as signs of interpersonal trust and community resilience (THELEN 2011).

While contemporary and historical practices in CEE offer a potential inspiration for degrowth futures, they should not be over-romanticised. Indeed, framing parts of the social organisation under state socialism in positive terms remains problematic, as these benefits were overshadowed by state violence and major violations of human rights. In relation to more grassroots practices, some revisions might be required in terms of

inclusivity and gender equality. Furthermore, some practices – being rather informal, ‘inconspicuous’ and ‘quiet’ – do not necessarily challenge existing structures but instead work around them, and in some cases may help to maintain power structures in place (PUNGAS ET AL. 2022). Apart from raising the question of their transformative potential, this might also represent a challenge for intergenerational skill transfer if the youth is attracted to more ‘vocal’ movements while the elderly remain cautious about explicit political activism.

The final part of the discussion addressed possible reasons for why proponents of degrowth often overlook this richness of traditions. Within the East, certain practices are refused precisely due to their association with a past authoritarian regime. Collective projects are sometimes received with suspicion, which echoes the past resistance towards communal activities that were presented as voluntary but in reality were imposed in a top-down fashion. These experiences, paired with neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility, also lead to concerns that collective care will result in a ‘tragedy of the commons’.⁷ However, there are also some hopeful examples of reclaiming relevant practices from their past negative connotations: for instance, the cooperative movement, while previously co-opted by socialist regimes, seems to be regaining its ethos in recent years (JOHANISOVA ET AL. 2013, 2020). In other cases, though, there remains an internalised othering,⁸ where local actors feel that good examples and best practices need to be searched for elsewhere (mostly in the West).

The reasons for marginalising ‘Eastern’ practices are not necessarily directly related to their association with state-socialism or the East, but instead they are related to their developmentalist framing as ‘backward’. Practices such as food self-provisioning, creative repair, non-monetised mutual care and trust relations are often framed as remnants of traditional (in the sense of non-modern), rural societies. If there is a stigmatisation of Eastern practices as *Eastern*, it intersects with other forms of othering which see non-market economies, traditional forms of knowledge, informal trust-based relations, the reproductive sphere and rural areas as inferior to market, expert-based, productivist and urban visions of modernity.

2.4 Building Bridges Between Existing Grassroot Initiatives and the Degrowth Movement

The prevalence of various degrowth-compatible practices in the East, as discussed in the previous section, seems like a promising ground for degrowth activists to learn from and engage with. However, as we have experienced at multiple degrowth conferences and activist-academic endeavours, the respective communities of practice in CEE (whether in food self-provisioning, workers' cooperatives, social cafés or other activities) have been largely overlooked by the Western degrowth scholarly/activist movement. Despite various publications emphasising the urgent need for alliances (KNOE 2017; BARLOW ET AL. 2022), with regard to CEE in particular (SEE GEBAUER ET AL. 2023), bridges between the degrowth movement and Eastern practitioners on the ground are yet to be built.

Moreover, missing recognition is not the only obstacle. Even within the CEE context – where such recognition may indeed exist – there is a tension between the approaches and narratives of ‘quiet’ practitioners and the degrowth movement: while the practitioners mostly prefer to remain ‘quiet’ in the political sense (i.e. they mostly refuse to be seen or present themselves as ‘alternative’, ‘green’ or even ‘anti-capitalist’) (JACOBSSON 2015; LEIPNIK 2015; PUNGAS ET AL. 2022), the degrowth movement is political by definition. Considering the temporal urgency of striving for a socio-ecological transformation and systemic change, the degrowth movement urges us to consider that ‘there is no time to be quiet anymore’. Therefore, our last discussion table in Zagreb addressed the following challenge: “How can we build bridges and alliances between the degrowth movement and degrowth-aligned practitioners on the ground?” It explored the existing obstacles to cooperation between the two groups and gained insights from the attendees, who – in many cases – did have valuable experience in bringing both milieux together.

The most prominent obstacle voiced by the attendees was that of ‘different everyday realities’ that are not sufficiently considered by – in many cases, urban, young, university-educated and liberal – degrowth activists, as they do not sufficiently reflect upon their own privileges (such as their legal, economic or educational status, citizenship or other privileges). In addition, explicit political activism within the movement

might end up marginalising, devaluing or judging ‘quiet’ initiatives on the ground for their mundane struggles, having ‘too limited a focus’ or not being ‘radical enough’.

Furthermore, the more revolutionary and radical approaches of the degrowth movement often reflect abstract theories that may not promise any concrete benefits or practical usefulness for practitioners. This might be connected with different everyday realities, a specific use of language (e.g. Marxist terminology, see also Section 2.1), or the habitus of proponents of degrowth (perceived as operating in an exclusive academic ivory tower and/or as too ‘radical’). If these differences are not taken seriously they will reproduce prejudices and alienate the two groups, instead of creating a collectively shared space for building alliances and joining forces.

Finally, as many scholars ^(E.G. JACOBSSON – KOROLCZUK 2020; LEIPNIK 2015; REKHAVIASHVILI 2023; PUNGAS 2023; JEHLIČKA ET AL. 2019) have explored, political and civic engagement in the ‘Global East’ (and elsewhere) often manifests itself in less formal and organised forms and rather ‘quietly’ in ‘everyday resistance’. This by no means should make it less worthwhile or give cause for its subordination by more explicit political activists. It is equally important to bear in mind that in the East, political opposition was suppressed and persecuted for decades, and leftist values around solidarity are heavily discredited in the current political context. All in all, this might not allow for the same radical and ‘loud’ anti-capitalist struggles as those within Western movements.

As for the positive experiences and suggestions for future alliances shared at this table, the first idea voiced was to develop flexible and innovative forms of collaborative action in which different stakeholders come together with an explicit focus on shared concrete challenges and interests ^(CF. GAGYI 2019). The mentioned examples included the Budapest, Brno and Zagreb degrowth conferences (held in 2016, 2022 and 2023 respectively), during which various social solidarity and degrowth initiatives were actively encouraged to participate and co-create the cultural festival and activist programme (e.g. self-care sessions, trips to activist spaces and open space formats).

Secondly, an emphasis on common denominators that touch upon everyone's everyday reality and reproductive needs (such as food, housing, and mobility) has proved useful, expedient and productive for such encounters and collaborations. It is also useful as a communication strategy for building further potential alliances and finding common ground between stakeholders that – at first glance – do not seem to have much in common. For instance, during the discussion at this table and in our own activist research (PUNGAS 2024), food emerged as an excellent 'common denominator' as it can be everything at the same time: healthy, seasonal, and tasty nutrition is a shared intrinsic value and motivation for many; cooking and sharing food together serves as a practice for building community and trust; and activities around food offer a cultural and educational exchange of know-how. Here, one encouraging example that was mentioned was a series of transdisciplinary events that brought together food self-provisioning practitioners, food scholars and activists in a politically sensitive context in Eastern Estonia (PUNGAS – KISS 2023).

However, such a common ground (e.g. food or livelihoods in rural areas) can also provoke discomfort and result in unexpected coalitions. For instance, one workshop participant told us how a political action that involved occupying the Polish Ministry of Agriculture attracted the questionable support of a right wing party. This demonstrated the challenges of manoeuvring between an alleged common ground and broader support, yet politically opposing particular ideologies and value systems (this is comparable with the expressed concern about 'degrowth-washing' in Section 2.1).

Thirdly, embodied and physical spaces of encounter are essential. Some participants told us that the first post-socialist food co-op in Poland succeeded thanks to a collectively shared place to pick up directly harvested food (and meet each other). Shared housing was mentioned as yet another place to (re)connect with each other on a regular basis while engaging in daily activities of social reproduction.

The final reflection rounds concluded that shared physical encounters are necessary to enable grassroots activists to communicate the values of a 'good life' that lie *behind* abstract ideas such as degrowth, anti-capitalist struggle or food sovereignty. These values are often shared by the

majority of people and serve as an optimal common ground for ‘building bridges’ and getting different stakeholder groups to join their forces together in order to improve the concrete, tangible, practical daily wellbeing and livelihoods for all. However, it is crucial to be receptive towards the ‘other’ and their everyday realities – and accordingly use the appropriate language, offer flexible/creative formats and communicate values that do not reproduce further alienation and division. Instead, providing inspiring yet concrete examples of improved livelihoods while opening space for genuine co-creation and addressing the mundane challenges of the people seems like the most promising strategy – but only when done on an equal footing.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As discussed in the previous sections, the main aim of this contribution is to explore and make visible the degrowth-aligned infrastructures, practices and know-how in the CEE region for international degrowth scholarship in general, and for local movements in particular. As we are activist scholars, our perspective on degrowth in CEE is not purely analytical – instead, we also seek practical steps through which the movement can advance its goals. With this in mind, based on both our world café discussions in Zagreb, and the subsequent collective reflection process, we conclude by outlining the main challenges identified and suggesting promising ways forward.

3.1 Dualisms and Binaries

Dualisms and binaries (e.g. Global North-Global South; East-West; developed-developing) in the perception of reality were a revolving motif throughout all the tables. While often a useful analytical tool, they can lead to oversimplification and polarisation along a single dimension of differences. It is therefore necessary for post-socialist degrowth scholarship to scrutinise dualisms and prevent these mental constructs from reinforcing inequality and hierarchies (SEE ALSO ARADAU 2024: 13). Throughout the world café tables, three strategies appeared as ways of overcoming binaries: i) describing shades of grey between two idealised opposites; ii) finding third ways out of false dichotomies; and iii) finding unexpected similarities, links, or alliances across them.

One of the starting points and motivations for this paper is the problematisation of the dualism between the Global North and the Global South. Establishing the Global East as a third category (see Note 1) provides a useful umbrella term but still comes short of capturing the internal heterogeneity of the region. And while building economic alternatives in post-socialist contexts needs to consider specific local histories, finding commonalities beyond this context is equally valuable. Analysing CEE's integration in global capitalist processes but also recognising its own role in shaping the developmentalist narrative (or "developmentalist illusion", see Arrighi 1990) is required for examining its region-specific conditions for degrowth alongside those of other (semi-)peripheries. Notably, the struggles in the Global South can offer inspiration in terms of analysing existing power dynamics and identifying leverage points, while critical scholarship can contribute to a critical examination of internal othering and self-colonisation.

The temporal dichotomy between past and future presents another dualism which is accentuated in CEE by the fall of the socialist regimes. On the one hand, there is a split between socialist and post-socialist, but on an even deeper level, this is coloured by a division between tradition and modernity. The former two categories (socialist and post-socialist) are different forms of (aspiring) modernity, but both are oriented towards productivism and growth (BRKVIČ 2022: 39). Degrowth sees itself as a third alternative between accelerating globalisation and returning to traditional lifestyles (LATOURE 2018). But when the political socialisation of people is oriented along the axis of modernity-tradition (or globalisation-nationalism), it is difficult to find a middle ground unassociated with either pole. There is also a missing vocabulary and creating an appropriate vocabulary will require reappropriating concepts that are not associated with either of the two poles (as, for instance, is the case with 'innovation' or 'self-provisioning').

Further dualisms appear in the political self-identification of individuals and whole communities – including East vs. West, younger vs. older generations, and rural vs. urban. For instance, the experience of regime change may project into a generational split. In its most basic form, it can be described as a nostalgia for socialism (e.g. the so-called 'Ostalgie', which refers to a nostalgia for the former East Germany) versus a rejection of any continuities with the former regime. But this is not simply a matter of age,

as older generations can be the most conspicuous critics of the socialist past. A shared coping mechanism of internal othering uses references to the past but increasingly also to ‘Ostalgic’ compatriots who ‘can’t appreciate democracy’ (GAGYI 2016). Such antagonisms are further constructed and exploited by power coalitions promoting different economic and geopolitical strategies. In this situation, discussions about public services, frugal practices or economic alternatives can easily escalate into a conflict over the socialist heritage, modernity vs. tradition, or globalisation vs. national values. Such cracks run across language, everyday practices, and political subjectivities, materialising the accumulated traumas and socio-political conflicts of undemocratic regimes, difficult economic transitions, and the failure of capitalist developmentalism to close the perceived gap between CEE and ‘the West’. Grievances over the unfulfilled hopes of post-socialist catch-up projects are also leveraged by political elites, for instance, in neo-nationalist appeals regarding East European claims of belonging in the Western club of white supremacy, which combine national pride with anti-immigration sentiments, (for further argumentation and debate about this, see) (E.G., KALMAR 2023).

Once again, a middle ground which provides a critical toolbox for analysing the strengths and weaknesses of both eras is only slowly being formed by social scientists. Meanwhile, however, surprising connections are already bridging divides – for instance, when middle class youth – who are less affected by the culture wars around communism – pick up community traditions or engage in the practices of their grandparents, such as foraging or DIY repair (FERENČUHOVÁ 2022; JEHLIČKA ET AL. 2020). For poorer households, such practices have remained vital subsistence strategies and, as such, have often persisted until the present day. These strategies are deployed with varying levels of political interpretation, and therefore context-sensitivity is essential. However, simply acknowledging and recognising the existence of a wide spectrum of motives and activities (DANĚK ET AL. 2022) already works to transcend the polarising dualisms.

3.2 Revisiblisng and Epistemological Emancipation

As discussed at the world café in Zagreb, various case studies from the East demonstrate a broad variety of local specifics such as certain mentalities and practices of quiet sustainability that could be emphasised as necessary

and complementary pathways towards socio-ecological transformation. This is particularly important with regard to the decolonial ethos of the degrowth movement. Regional specificities and socialist legacies that are aligned with the ideas of frugality, sufficiency and conviviality should be recognised, acknowledged and reactivated. As such, it is our task as activist scholars to carefully (re-)visibilise and (re-)value them as socio-ecologically valuable practices that demonstrate diverse pathways and possibilities of other ways of living and consuming.

Revaluing these pathways can also help in finding shortcuts or alternatives leading towards degrowth modes of living, as opposed to the ‘imperial mode of living’ (BRAND – WISSEN 2021) – without having to undertake the struggle against the already-entrenched growth ideologies confronted by the degrowth movement in Western Europe. This is not specifically to call for exploiting the ‘advantage of underdevelopment’ (LIBROVÁ 1997) or leap-frogging, as these tropes tend to leave the primacy of the Western trajectory unquestioned. The pathway is clearly not universal (that is, the same for all) or linear (with predetermined stages in a given order), and it is not a race (the logic of ‘being ahead’ loses relevance in a degrowth transformation). The proposed shortcut simply means finding a pathway relevant for a given national or local context. It would be based on following particular standards of a ‘good life’ and focusing on the sovereign prioritisation of various socio-ecological goals while engaging in an active cooperation and conversation with the rest of the world. The West, epitomised in CEE as *the* direction to follow, would thus lose its privileged position and its status as a point of reference but remain present in coalitions and good practice networks on a more equal footing.

Against this backdrop, actors in CEE could promote region-specific practices and forms of quiet sustainability and civic/political engagement, inconspicuous adaptations, existing infrastructures for collective and frugal needs satisfaction as well as further cultural specifics related to how the natural world is perceived and lived with. These are all part of the global transformation rather than mere add-ons to already-existing Western concepts of sustainability. With regard to epistemological equity, then, we join the scholars that argue for the East to also become a place where valuable knowledge and universal theories are generated (JEHLIČKA 2021; MÜLLER 2020; TRUBINA ET AL. 2020). Furthermore, it is important to

recognise how post-socialism, rather than being constrained to a specific historical period, constitutes a part of the global present and allows for extending a political imagination (BRKOVIĆ 2022: 35). In order to advance these goals, establishing a locally-embedded sustainability research basis within CEE would help to communicate these frameworks both internally and with the rest of the world, and foster locally embedded emergent collectivities and political action.

3.3 Practical steps Forward

Finally, we want to propose some concrete strategies and suggest some further steps that emerge from our discussion. Quiet sustainability practices in CEE should be recognised within the degrowth community as valuable examples of the ‘pluralist pathways’ towards a post-growth world, and as inspirational models of frugality, conviviality, grassroots activism, civic engagement and resilience. Hitherto, they have not yet been considered as full contributions to the degrowth debate. It is, however, crucial to keep in mind that a number of these practices appeared (or thrived) under (or *due to*) the undemocratic and authoritarian regimes in CEE or due to the economic hardship and political instability experienced during the post-socialist era. Therefore, context sensitivity and caution are required when suggesting that they are exemplary. Brković (2022: 42) argues that while we acknowledge socialist as well as post-socialist failures, the focus on and locus of everyday lives and practices allow us to avoid the impasse of ‘either-or’ – between a failed experiment and a blueprint for a utopian future.

Revaluation of socio-ecological practices in CEE is needed not only internationally but also within CEE itself, where neoliberal elites have succeeded in framing technological advances as the single key to prosperity and sustainability. The region’s cultural and social innovations that actually match state-of-the-art or better-known sustainability examples worldwide remain under-recognised or are framed as backward. To counter these narratives, a stronger sustainability research network within CEE could act as a means of making the inconspicuous innovations more conspicuous (E.G. CESCAME 2024).

Furthermore, to achieve this revaluation of overlooked and fringe practices, new local and global alliances need to be forged. Within them, diversity and genuine openness should be guiding principles for avoiding rigid and narrow definitions of sustainability. Even more importantly, these alliances should guarantee an equal footing between scholars, politicians and/or journalists on one side, and actual practitioners on the ground on the other. Intellectual and political discourses on degrowth need to primarily give voice and space to the practitioners rather than merely interpreting and representing them. With this in mind, participatory co-creation and co-design should not operate as mere spaces for self-expression for the latter, but need to transcend current power structures and political processes in an inclusive way.

In this regard, we consider it important to collectively reflect on the aspect of ‘messiness’ and hybridity. Not only are our own positionalities often hybrid/‘messy’ (we are ‘in-between Easterners’ in the sense of being privileged and outsiders at the same time, as discussed in the introduction) but so was our learning experience from the Zagreb conference. The post-socialist condition seems constraining at first, yet simultaneously it holds potential. However, for this potential for degrowth *from* and *in* CEE to materialise, we need to strive for an in-depth understanding of the apparent contradictions and learn to reconstruct them productively into future degrowth opportunities (SOVOVÁ ET AL. FORTHCOMING). As Brković (2022: 35) describes the challenge: “[it] is about figuring out what else there is to do after the utopian political project you pursued has failed, besides replicating patterns of (ethno-)racial capitalism”. Our scholarly-activist realisation that lived degrowth realities are often ‘messy’ and hold (alleged) contradictions also opens up further space for mutual understanding and mobilisation with both the South and peripheral groups in the West.

As such, we conclude with a proposition of a four-fold strategy to pursue inclusive, decolonial and truly sustainable degrowth, both in CEE and elsewhere:

Firstly, alliances are urgently needed between the degrowth movement and the ‘deprived and discontented’ (BRENNER ET AL. 2011); this means potential coalitions between practitioners on the ground (often impoverished and left-behind) and (degrowth) activist-scholars (often from more

privileged backgrounds) (SEE, FOR INSTANCE, PUNGAS – KISS 2023). Describing this necessity from a structural angle, Gagyí (2023) also calls for connecting community-based and mutual help practices with existing organised labour movements (as important allies for degrowth activists in the region). As ‘there is no time to be quiet anymore’ (a reminder repeatedly voiced by the CEE participants at the Zagreb conference, alluding to the concept of ‘quiet sustainability’), this strategy calls for a bridging of the gaps between these groups and a joining of their potential forces.

Secondly, we argue that particularly the ‘Western’ degrowth scholarship and movement should be further re-politicised with regard to their decolonial ethos, as they have hitherto overlooked certain regions and peripheries. For instance, our collective perception at the Zagreb degrowth conference in 2023 indicated that the East remained a ‘blind spot’ (it was thematically absent, for instance, at panels focused on ‘decolonial degrowth’) despite the conference itself happening in CEE. As activist-scholars coming from or active in the region, we struggle with the dominance of Western frames, from which the CEE region’s specific capacities for degrowth alternatives are hard to see. In order to discover and harness the capacities of CEE, we plead for a more serious engagement with Eastern specifics, more conversation with other (semi-)peripheral regions and groups, and a reconsideration of Western examples – they should be seen not as (role) models but as only one part of a global system. We count on Western degrowthers as our allies and partners in this endeavour.

Thirdly, we propose to fill the abstract and rather theoretical notions of degrowth with lived and ‘messy’ degrowth realities from the ground (Sovová et al. forthcoming). Though it also manifests elsewhere, this ‘messiness’ may be particularly relevant in CEE, where sustainability practices are often imbued with a conservative, nationalist, or isolationist ethos. Rather than rejecting such combinations right away and looking solely for a ‘pure’ degrowth in line with the Western imaginary, degrowth scholarship should strive for a more nuanced understanding of practitioners and ‘imperfect/inconsistent’ examples on the ground and offer them the epistemological equity discussed above.

Finally, we believe that the time has come for scholar-activists from the East to further engage in and pursue a region-specific and

context-sensitive ‘degrowth strategy/manifesto’ for the post-socialist semi-periphery. It seems to be of importance to collectively find answers to the following challenge: How can we resist the current destructive trajectory and transform towards degrowth while building upon CEE’s socialist and post-socialist heritage? Our first world café in Zagreb has initiated discussions on exactly these questions and we hope to pursue this endeavour together with scholars, activists and practitioners on the ground in order to find regionally embedded pathways that would allow for a ‘good life for all’ in the semi-peripheral CEE.

ENDNOTES

- 1 We primarily refer to CEE throughout the paper, but also discuss it in relation to the broader category of the ‘Global East’ where necessary. The idea of a Global East as an epistemic space in contrast to the Global North and South, has been increasingly discussed and debated within the relevant scholarship (Müller 2020; Cima – Sovová 2022). However, in this contribution we limit the meaning of the ‘East’ to the post-socialist CEE while acknowledging vast differences within this region. From the viewpoint of world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974), post-socialist Europe – or previously a part of the ‘Second World’ – has been considered to be a semi-periphery (Arrighi 1990); hence our reference to the East as a semi-periphery throughout the paper.
- 2 In the spatio-temporal descriptive sense, the term ‘post-socialist’ is understood as referring to a region (CEE or the former Soviet bloc) and/or an epoch (the post-Cold War / post-1989 era).
- 3 Smith and Jehlička (2013: 155) have defined quiet sustainability as “*practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes, that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions, and that are not represented by the practitioners as relating directly to environmental or sustainability goals.*”
- 4 World café is a methodology used to facilitate group conversations. It involves multiple ‘tables’ which gather together groups of participants, and each table discusses a pre-defined topic or question. Key points of the conversation are recorded by a note-taker. After a defined period of time, the participants change tables and build on the previous discussions when dealing with a different question.
- 5 Ferenčuhová (2022: 742) understands ‘inconspicuous adaptations’ to be daily, routine, hidden, habitual, unreflexive, and often “*creative responses which are developed outside the frameworks of the market, technocratic expertise or governance. They include inventing, sharing and reproducing ‘home-made’ solutions or lowering one’s standards of comfort.*” As opposed to conspicuous and official strategies, they also encompass a variety of informal solutions and knowledge.
- 6 On food self-provisioning as a ‘quiet’ degrowth practice, see Daněk and Jehlička (2020). For empirical studies of food self-provisioning in the East, see, for instance, Jehlička et al. (2020), Pungas (2024) on *dacha* economies in Estonia, and Decker (2018) and Sovová et al. (2021) on, respectively, subsistence farming and urban gardening in Czechia.
- 7 The ‘tragedy of the commons’ is a metaphoric label and concept put forward by Garrett Hardin for situations in which individuals have (free) access to common and limited resources and tend to over-consume them. This exhaustion then comes at the expense of a collective. This concept has been criticised and challenged by, among others, Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize for her life-long work, which she presented in her book *Governing the Commons* (1990).

- 8 'Internal othering' is understood here as a process through which allegedly 'backward' regions, value systems and/or mindsets are compared to more 'modern' and 'progressive' ones, often within the same country or society. In this process, the former are 'othered' – perceived as 'deviant', inferior, or maybe even antithetical to the supposed and desired norm and reference point (see also Johnson – Coleman 2012)
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NOTE

We are grateful to all our colleagues and friends from the Polička Collective that have inspired this stimulating reflection process all along. We want to acknowledge the support of Sophia Kevic and Noah Suter in finalizing the bibliography. Moreover, we want to express our appreciation and gratitude to all the participants at our world café table discussions in Zagreb for their valuable reflections and trust. Special thanks to Josef Patočka for co-facilitating the workshop. Thomas Smith's involvement in this collaborative project was supported through an H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (grant number 101029512). Markus Sattler's involvement was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [SFB 1199, sub-project A02]. Eva Fraňková's involvement was supported by the project “Resilience of Society in Times of Crisis II” (MUNI/A/1510/2023).

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