

Energy Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: A Neo-Colonial Perspective

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ABSTRACT	<p>The article examines the neo-colonial influence in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries' energy transitions, relating energy neo-colonialism with power asymmetries. Most CEE countries began to reduce their reliance on Russian energy after the Cold War, elevating energy security to new levels around 2010. Although European Union (EU) norms have helped counteract Russia's influence on energy, they have brought about a neoliberal neo-colonialism. On the one hand, the CEE countries need reliable and affordable energy supplies to maintain their economic growth, which leaves them prone to the Russian influence. On the other hand, the EU's energy rules and regulations, which disregarded the CEE countries' interests, have resulted in disobedience. The article employs the degrowth concept to examine energy neo-colonialism in the CEE, contending that the concept stands out as a hopeful signpost for realizing the scenario wherein the CEE countries' interests can be protected and prioritized.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are sensitive to energy security since the neo-colonial implications thereof still linger.¹ Despite the comprehensive overhaul of their socio-economic systems after the Cold War, most CEE countries are still working to eliminate their reliance on Russian energy.² Worse, their ongoing energy transitions have given Russia and other external actors new chances to exert influence. Analytically, the article conceptualizes the power asymmetry behind the CEE countries' energy predicament as *energy neo-colonialism*.

At first glance, one could argue that neo-colonialism cannot be applied to CEE countries since pigeonholing post-communist/post-socialist societies into the post-colonial compartment has been contested. Despite the nuances, however, the article studies CEE countries' energy neo-colonialism by setting them against the backdrop of post-colonial literature, while underlining their disadvantageous stance in energy supply chains. Besides, Laura Adams claims that discussing Central Eurasia's post-coloniality "*can help to refine postcolonial theory by exposing it to a broader range of imperial projects*" (ADAMS 2008: 6). Moreover, the political emancipatory aspect epistemologically implied in post-colonialism accords with the CEE countries' aspiration to manage their dependence on Russian energy (CERVINKOVA 2012: 159).

The CEE countries have been driven into the capitalist modes of modernization after the abortion of the socialist vision, and thus they embarked on a bumpy neoliberal journey. Although most CEE countries have reduced their reliance on Russian energy, the neoliberal ideology exemplified by European Union (EU) norms is not without neo-colonial implications when it takes hold in the region. As Madina Tlostanova observes, the CEE countries have been mired in global-scale neoliberal neo-colonialism after escaping from "*the specific Soviet modernity with its own colonialism*" (TLOSTANOVA 2015: 39). Either way, the CEE countries are in a subaltern position; designations, such as *satellite states* of the Soviet Union and *new member states* of the EU, have evidenced their marginal roles. Despite their impressive economic development, the CEE countries, according to Aleksandra Kordalska and Magdalena Olczyk (2019: 751), still count on Germany to export their products beyond the EU. In other words, the CEE countries

only play a secondary role in the European value chain. Be that as it may, whereas studies on Russian influence and de-Russianization have become a well-trodden path, the scholarly literature on CEE countries' transitions has focused less on the neo-colonial implications pertinent to neoliberalism; and still less have we thought of any means to manage them.

The article examines neo-colonial powers in CEE countries by focusing on their energy transitions. Energy is vital for socio-economic development. Energy transition, which is driven by normative and material capacities, is a lens through which neo-colonial powers can be best understood. According to John Szabo and Andras Deak (2021: 64), the CEE countries have undergone two energy transitions: the one directed by Moscow between the 1960s and 1980s built their reliance on Russian energy, and the other, which was directed by the EU in the 2010s, has oriented them towards the renewable energy transition.

Russia has been haunting the CEE countries' energy security like no other actor for decades. Although the CEE countries began to dovetail with the EU *aquis communautaire* as early as the early 1990s, market power only played a minimal role in reducing Russia's energy influence on them (IBID.). Consequently, most CEE countries lacked reliable and affordable alternatives in their energy transitions, and thus remained in the old grooves. Worse, the neoliberal medicine has resulted in the side effects of populism and Euroscepticism (CARRIERI - VITTORI 2021). More alarmingly, the CEE countries' energy transitions have created a vacuum that is easily exploitable by neo-colonial forces. Therefore, although talking about energy futures could bring about "*analytical and practical possibilities for imagining and practicing futures otherwise*" (WALTORP ET AL. 2023: 207), it seems that no possible imaginaries seemingly can assure the CEE countries of their energy security.

The article holds that although EU rules and regulations have, to a degree, helped counteract Russia's influence on energy, the CEE countries are mired in energy neo-colonialism. Not only have Russian entities assumed new roles in the disguise of market power, but the EU has driven the CEE countries into the quagmire of neoliberal neo-colonialism. The article aims to shed light on the CEE countries' local interests, suggesting an ideal degrowth scenario. The term "ideal" here refers to their yearning

for a better future, even if the scenario were deemed naïve and unrealistic. Therefore, no matter how we name the scenario after the neo-colonial stage, it is worth it to imagine an exit. Degrowth, like other seemingly utopian ideas, has offered different economic and ecological imaginaries (KALLIS – MARCH 2015: 366). Put differently, the degrowth scenario examined in the article is not the one and only transition pathway. Rather, it serves as a hopeful signpost to a just energy transition. Additionally, the neo-colonial discourse in the article is not necessarily incompatible with conventional realist perspectives if the latter can be used to justify the political necessity of energy transition.

The article consists of three parts. The first part conceptualizes energy neo-colonialism. Colonialism is closely associated with energy resources, and so is neo-colonialism. Energy security will not be trivialized as long as the growth-thematized capitalist mode still triumphs as the only playbook. Essentially, energy neo-colonialism is closely associated with the power asymmetry emanating from normative authority and energy resources. The second part zeroes in on two neo-colonial energy phases in the CEE countries. The EU's neoliberal agenda is the antidote-cum-poison here. Whereas the market-oriented agenda has helped in the CEE countries' de-Russianization, it has driven them into the neo-colonial quagmire. Given this, the part suggests managing the EU's neoliberal neo-colonial influence by drawing inspiration from the literature on degrowth. The third and final part summarizes the article, briefly discussing the degrowth pathway's feasibility in the CEE countries.

CONCEPTUALIZING ENERGY NEO-COLONIALISM

Neo-colonialism is "*the worst form of imperialism*" since neo-colonial forces are accustomed to exercising power without bearing responsibility (NKURUMAH 1966). Genealogically, neo-colonialism, replacing colonialism, occurred at a more advanced stage of capitalism. Unlike colonial dominance through the barrel of the gun, neo-colonialism often sings the gospel of market power. Therefore, although at the core of both neo-colonialism and colonialism are similar mandates for economic growth, the paths toward achieving it differ. Whereas colonial economic growth in the colonial era was driven by explicit exploitation and secured by institutionalization, the

neo-colonial way of wealth extraction and accumulation often proceeds covertly (HARRISON 1997: 53).

The covertness of neo-colonialism is associated with the complexity resulting from its multi-scalar and multi-agent nature. Broadly speaking, neo-colonialism refers to “*a capitalist power[.]exercised by various means without direct colonial rule*” (ADDIS – ZHU 2018: 366). Unlike the imperial metropole-colony nexus, neo-colonialism comprises a more complicated network of forces, as it already revealed itself in various forms, such as carbon colonialism (LYONS – WESTOBY 2014), hydro-colonialism (BATEL – KÜPERS 2023), and data colonialism (MUMFORD 2022).

Neo-colonialism can potentially bring about investments into economically backward countries eager to climb to the top rung of the international status ladder. More importantly, neo-colonial agents, such as transnational companies and international aiders, are less likely to touch the sensitive nerve of sovereignty. Viewed as apolitical or at least less polluted by politics, market and moral powers have paved the way for neo-colonialism.

We are often told that neo-colonialism makes sense only if it is discussed in post-colonial societies. If this is the case, then a few lines should be spared on the debate on whether CEE countries should be viewed as post-colonial societies. For Romanian scholar Bogdan Ștefănescu, postcolonialism and post-communism are “*siblings of subalternity*” (ȘTEFĂNESCU 2013, QUOTED IN KALNAČS 2020: 256). Nevertheless, he has left the difference between post-communism (or post-socialism) and post-colonialism uncritiqued, and the quarrel between Western European and CEE scholars continues. Among others, Czech anthropologist Petr Skalník believes that the concept of *post-communism* developed by Western European and North American scholars is a mistaken concept, contending that the preference for it has led people to “*believe that socialism really existed in the countries dominated in the past by the Communist Party*” (SKALNÍK 2002, QUOTED IN CERVINKOVA 2017: 157).

Irrespective of the debate, the article views the CEE countries as post-colonial societies since they articulate similar grievances over the Soviet past in rebuilding their identities. As Albert Memmi wrote in 1957, “*cultural ‘self-discovery’ played an important part in freeing the ‘colonial mind’*”

(MEMMI 1991, QUOTED IN WISE, 2010: 294). What is of note is that neo-colonial anxiety is growing alongside the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Timothy Garton Ash (2023: 64), in discussing how the war is transforming Europe, depicts it as a manifestation of Moscow's intention "to restore the Russian empire by recolonizing Ukraine." With imminent threats in mind, scholars, once again, turn to neo-colonialism, attempting to understand Russia's neo-colonialist ambitions in Ukraine and beyond (BOUZAROVSKI ET AL. 2023).

Colonial growth was built on exploiting resources in the colonies (KALLIS 2018: 180). Put differently, energy demand is one of the "driving forces of colonial expansions" (WALTORP ET AL. 2023: 169). Although the colonial era has gone, the theme of growth has been inherited and popularized to the extent that any doubt about it would be deemed blasphemous. The strategic and commercial significance of energy resources has been elevated to new levels when "[t]he neo-liberal narrative of globalization chants a free market mantra that requires a continual supply of cheap raw materials" (PHILIP 2001: 5). Consequently, increasingly monetized energy dependence creates the space for energy neo-colonialism.

Nature abhors a vacuum (*horror vacui*). The ancient adage applies to the pervasive neo-colonial forces as well, and the new space created alongside energy transitions will soon be filled. Since "transition" is a euphemism for "crisis" (TORNEL 2023: 6), energy transition, implying an urgent need to change, will be easily exposed to external influence.

To secure socio-economic development, the have-nots often turn to the haves for energy supplies, regardless of whether the demand is satisfied by tanks or banks. Often, the convenience in such cases, as Nkrumah (1966: XIII) noted, is provided by previous colonial powers. It is because dependence built across time is inertial when hard infrastructures, such as railways and pipelines, and soft infrastructures, such as financial mechanisms, can be used without incurring extra costs or when there are no alternatives. Regardless of the nuances, whereas imperial powers were mainly natural resource users (YPI 2013: 161), neo-colonial forces can exert influence by distributing natural resources, including energy resources.

To function properly, energy neo-colonialism preys on the power asymmetry emanating from normative authority and energy resource

provisions. Normative authority derives from the capacity to disseminate specific rules and regulations, including prioritizing particular types or categories of primary energy resources. Therefore, even a change in the energy nomenclature would dictate the goal of energy transition.

The power asymmetry resulting from energy resource provisions is a two-way street. On the one hand, the haves are still likely to be unfairly exploited in global value chains. In discussing international value transfers, Andy Higginbottom (2018: 52) regards resource exploitation as a mutation of neo-colonial capitalism. On the other hand, the haves can contingently politicalize energy resources to their benefit. In this aspect, whereas the otherwise disadvantaged small powers have learned to weaponize energy resources by establishing intergovernmental organizations, such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia's energy weaponization is for control and compliance.

Energy neo-colonialism results in neo-colonial landscapes, including large-scale infrastructural projects through which new power asymmetries will be confirmed and consolidated (DUNLAP 2023). Andrew Curley states that “[i]nfrastructures are both the physical and political structure of colonialism” (CURLEY 2021: 14); this line applies equally to energy neo-colonialism. Nevertheless, neo-colonial landscapes are far more complex than colonial ones since they, besides tangible hard infrastructures, they also consist of intangible soft infrastructures, namely the normative network constituted by rules and regulations, which are more intricate than those in the colonial era. Colonial rules were mainly made to manage relations between European powers and were often premised on the use of coercive power (SCHUERCH 2017). By contrast, the neo-colonial version is more complicated and has many forms. As Res Schuerch (2017: 27), in discussing European colonialism and neo-colonialism, points out, “The label ‘neo-colonialism’ is not only used in relation to states but also in conjunction with multinational corporations and international institutions.”

Although neoliberal doctrines have not yet been historicized, they should be examined critically. Neoliberal neo-colonialism is the negative side of “the neoliberal mode of development” (NEILSON 2020).³ As Micheal O’Flynn observes, neoliberal policies are but a new way to rationalize contemporary capitalism’s “renewed enthusiasm to create opportunities for unhindered

accumulation on an international basis” (O’FLYNN 2009: 143). Interestingly, the neoliberal neo-colonialism the EU represents has arguably been less discussed as we are often told the EU’s normative and regulatory power is technocratic and, hence, depolitized (WAGNER 2017: 1401).

On the contrary, Thomas Diez (2013: 199) contends that the EU is a hegemon since it repeatedly employs economic threats to enforce its norms. Given this, Nora Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis categorize the EU-led Europe as a neo-colonial power, “*acknowledging the inflections of colonialism in the EU project*” (ONAR – NICOLAÏDIS 2013: 283). Besides projecting its neo-colonial influence externally, the EU has done so internally as well. Internal neo-colonization can be conducted by following ethnic lines; the practice writ large applies to countries and regions. As Joe Turner (2018: 770–771) puts it, internal neo-colonialism is multi-scalar and can proceed as epistemic violence.

Since a similar mandate for growth is at the core of the neoliberal prescription and the colonial mode of production, enshrining neoliberal doctrines in post-colonial societies has replicated imperial solutions for colonies. Tragically, we will be mired in the trap of endless growth unless alternative pathways replace it. Among other possibilities, the degrowth pathway has the potential to manage neoliberal neo-colonialism. Besides that, it helps address the ecological debts accumulated in the Anthropocene (BHAMBRA – NEWELL 2023: 180–182) since it disagrees with our pursuit of exponential economic growth,⁴ which otherwise has disastrous implications for the environment and humanity (LATOCHE 2009: 8).

Degrowth should not be misunderstood as negative growth; it aims to make ends meet with society’s throughput (KALLIS 2011). More importantly, underlining human welfare and being aware of the limits to growth, the degrowth pathway has delivered “*political imaginaries oriented towards substantial, if not radical, societal transformation*” (ESCOBAR 2015: 456). Instead of only ingratiating itself with a certain number of countries, it also opens “*the possibility for a society that is not capitalist*” (KALLIS – MARCH 2015: 366), rendering a re-institution of the economy feasible (KALLIS 2018: 118). In other words, degrowth per se implies the consciousness of autonomy and the intention to make a difference in the “*world risk society*” (BECK 1999).⁵ After all, the other side of sovereign autonomy is the capacity to say no to external norms deemed incompatible and/or unjust.

CEE ENERGY TRANSITION: FROM DE-RUSSIANIZATION TO DEGROWTH?

Neo-colonial narratives, often invoking an unpleasant past, necessitate new decolonization initiatives. Energy neo-colonialism is no exception. While de-Russianization and de-carbonization characterize CEE countries' energy transitions, the EU's neoliberal rules and regulations have brought about cognitive injustice anew.

Since the present is the future past, the following section divides the CEE countries' energy neo-colonialism into two phases. The first phase started in the early 1990s and is ongoing. Assisted by and with the EU, the CEE countries, continuously counteracting Russia's energy influence, have employed a two-pronged approach – one strictly screens Russian investments by mainly following a collective EU approach. The other phase is the yet-to-come degrowth phase.

Russia, Still Around

The CEE countries are often disadvantaged since their energy transitions are mainly externally initiated and imposed (SZABO – DEAK 2021). They were catapulted into the neoliberal transition soon after the Cold War. As Andrej Nosko observes, the “[p]olitical and economic transition after the Cold War included shifts in allegiances and threats and provided rare opportunities for rapid policy change” (NOSKO 2013: 216). Nevertheless, most CEE countries still have not succeeded in reducing their reliance on Russian energy.

Historicism has set the tone for the CEE countries' relations with Russia. “For the CEE countries, energy is the most sensitive part of [their] trade with Russia, and [the] trade with Russia is not just [a] trade: it is marked by the shadow of it being [the] trade with the former hegemon” (BALMACEDA 2002: 13). In this aspect, although the Czech Republic's dependence on Russian energy is comparatively lower than those of other CEE countries,⁶ “it would be inaccurate to assume that fear of Russia is entirely absent in the field” (JIRUŠEK – KUCHYŇKOVÁ – VLČEK 2020: 118).

The CEE countries, playing the role of transit countries between Russia and Western Europe, are susceptible to Russia's “blackmail” (PROEDROU 2017).

For instance, the Yamal pipeline built from 1994 to 2006 had increased Poland's reliance on Russian energy considerably.⁷ Regardless of its small percentage in Poland's energy mix, Russia, perceived as a security risk, is a very sensitive issue (WEINER 2019). Although the EU intended to oblige Russia by signing a protocol on transit, it was to no avail since Russia had a favorable position (WESTPHAL 2006: 54); Moscow refused to sign the Transit Protocol, withdrawing from the Energy Charter Treaty in 2009 (HERRANZ-SURRALLÉS 2020). Consequently, as Tomasz Pawłuszko (2018: 75) notices, the CEE region remained dependent on Russian energy despite EU support; the Russian influence has been continuously permeating into most CEE countries (BINHACK – TICHY 2012).

In hindsight, although most CEE countries' reliance on Russian energy has been substantially reduced, the decrease is mainly attributed to the EU's consecutive sanctions against Russia. Therefore, although Poland can manage the impact, the cost is rather high (ANTOSIEWICZ – LEWANDOWSKI – SOKOŁOWSKI 2022). After all, the severity of the energy security problem in the CEE countries has not been eliminated and the problem is far from resolved. More alarmingly, despite the proclaimed "significant progress" in addressing their reliance on Russian energy, the CEE countries' demand for natural gas "could even increase in the coming years as coal fired power plants are phased out" (BEYER – MOLNAR 2022).

The CEE countries required, and still require, massive investments to counteract the Russian influence. As Margarita Balmaceda observes: "*The CEE states find themselves in a very different infrastructural situation concerning the possibility of overcoming their energy dependency on Russia. In contrast with the WE [Western European] states, the technical and infrastructural pre-conditions (i.e., diversified pipeline systems and connections with European-wide networks) are simply not present in these countries, and there are not enough pipelines to connect these countries to alternative oil and gas supplies*" (2002: 9).

Well aware of their disadvantages, the CEE countries were active in institutionalizing by following neoliberal prescriptions. On the one hand, they, keen to return to Europe, signed the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT), which ensured a collective voice for them vis-à-vis Russia (ISAACS – MOLNAR 2017). On the other hand, their markets witnessed an influx of external forces under the guise of normal market conditions after socio-economic

transitions. This happened, for example, with the Balcerowicz Plan in Poland and the Privatization Act in Hungary.⁸ As Wojciech Ostrowski notices, the CEE countries' post-decolonization ambitions have *"left them potentially vulnerable in regard to their energy links with Russia"* (OSTROWSKI 2022: 876),⁹ leading to a mushrooming of Russia-supported middle companies. Although the middle companies in Poland, instead of being *"the Kremlin's secret weapon,"* are *"merely a rent-seeking mechanism set up by political and business actors for the purposes of their own enrichment"* (OSTROWSKI 2021: 204), they have eventually increased Russia's neo-colonial influence.

Since the CEE countries are more vulnerable than their Western European counterparts, Russia's several gas cut-offs around 2010 have lent an added urgency to the CEE countries' energy transitions. Although the EU has frequently flexed its muscles to regulate the energy market, its member states have retained their competence. Therefore, the CEE countries, alongside the rising levels of nationalism in them, turned to setting up national champions, and aiming to establish energy companies capable of competing in the global market (WESTPHAL 2006). The Polish Oil and Gas Company (PGNiG) is a case in point, as it even punches beyond its weight to challenge Gazprom. According to Csaba Weiner, *"Poland was one of the Central and East European EU member states in which the European Commission investigated Gazprom's anti-competitive practices"* (WEINER 2019: 7).¹⁰ Or to mention another such case, a round of renationalization occurred in Hungary between 2010 and 2015, resulting in *"the majority of assets and exclusively all strategic companies [being] in state or domestic private ownership"* (DEAK – BARTHA – LEDERER 2019: 70).

The CEE countries also attempt to counteract the Russian influence through sub-regionalization, including rejuvenating the otherwise obsolete Visegrád Group (HOU 2021). Besides this, Poland, spearheading the search for new sub-regionalization initiatives, brought about the Three Seas Initiative (TSI). According to Piotr Buras, *"[e]nergy plays a central role in Warsaw's calculations for the TSI,"* and Poland even plans to build itself up as the CEE energy hub (BURAS 2017: 8). Seeking to develop the North-South axis in their energy network,¹¹ the TSI has devoted to the pipeline corridor between Świnoujście, Poland and Krk, Croatia.

Despite the above de-Russianization policy packages, the CEE countries' energy markets after the EU-led transition have become porous, allowing Russia to exert an even more significant neo-colonial influence in other forms, including through nuclear energy. On the one hand, although the West expected to shut down CEE countries' Soviet-built nuclear reactors by offering financial support, their efforts have largely failed (MÍŠÍK – PRACHÁROVÁ 2021B: 430). On the other hand, nuclear energy has been viewed as sustainable by following EU taxonomy (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022). An EU nuclear renaissance would leave more space for the Russian influence.

Although the Czech Republic favors non-Russian power companies when it comes to building nuclear power units and choosing fuel suppliers, few alternatives besides Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear power conglomerate, have been left after the US-based Westinghouse was excluded from the bidding for the tender for the construction of four nuclear power units at the Dukovany power plant since, as stated by the Czech government, *“the US bid did not meet the tender conditions”* (QUOTED BY ZACHOVÁ 2024). Other than that, Russia's nuclear technology is comparatively more compatible with the water-water energetic reactors (VVER) operating in CEE countries than the nuclear technologies of other potential suppliers. As Jirušek and his colleagues, harking back to the history, wrote: *“In the European post-communist region, nuclear energy was introduced with the help of the Soviet Union and power plants here house Russian technologies. Given that the vast complexity of the sector influences a whole group of related industrial sub-sectors, a country that chooses a certain supplier is likely to follow that path for decades to come. This also applies to providers of nuclear fuel, that [sic] also tend to remain the same over many years for similar reasons. Therefore, speaking of the nuclear-based capacity of post-communist Europe the structural dependency here also plays into the hands of Russian companies”* (JIRUŠEK – KUCHYŇKOVÁ – VLČEK 2020: 119).

Given the above, it is no surprise that, in the CEE countries, *“nuclear energy diplomacy emerges as a more ‘soft power’ facet of Russian actions”* (AALTO ET AL. 2017: 387). Besides, while some CEE countries take an ambiguous stance toward Russia, Hungary maintains a cordial relationship with Moscow, giving the latter a foothold for extending neo-colonial influence in the region.

The EU and Energy Neo-colonialism

Neoliberal doctrines, after more than three decades, have cultivated neo-liberal neo-colonialism in the CEE countries. Despite contributing to their socio-economic development, EU norms partially proved incompatible with them, and the related cognitive injustice continues unabated. Therefore, although the promise of a better tomorrow can, to some extent, sugarcoat exploitation, “[u]nder capitalism, market value encroaches and colonizes other social values” (KALLIS 2018: 16). When the bitter aftertaste of neo-colonialism set in, the CEE countries have witnessed a growing level of Euroscepticism. Besides, even the EU itself can hardly escape from being dented by “*the crises of advanced capitalism,*” such as the eurozone crisis (ESCOBAR 2015: 452).

CEE countries had to meet specific criteria, known as the enlargement conditionality, before their EU accession. According to Heather Grabbe (2002), the EU, when formulating the most comprehensive conditions for CEE countries, tended to link defined benefits with highly politicized requirements. As far as economics are concerned, “[t]he thrust of the EU’s economic agenda for CEE is neoliberal, emphasizing privatization of the means of production, a reduction in state involvement in the economy (particularly industry), and further liberalization of the means of exchange. Considering the variety of models of capitalism to be found among EU member states, the accession policy documents [...] promote a remarkably uniform view of what a “market economy should look like” (IBID.: 252).

Nevertheless, EU conditionality will lose its leverage when member states prioritize national interests over the EU consensus, especially when their particular interests are marginalized or denied. CEE countries have repeatedly clashed with the EU over energy security. For instance, a point of contention was that coal-based policies help ensure some CEE countries’ energy security (CZECH 2017), but regardless of the massive coal reserves in Poland and the Czech Republic, using coal in energy production will be strictly regulated in the future since “[t]he EU’s Green Deal identified the phasing-out of coal for energy production as an essential factor in achieving the 2030 climate targets and becoming climate-neutral by 2050” (EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS 2022). Therefore, although Poland failed in extending subsidies for coal plants in the EU arena (ABNETT 2023), most electricity generation in

Poland is still based on hard coal and lignite (POLISH ENERGY REGULATORY OFFICE 2023: 44).

Perceived injustice leads to protests and policy divergence. Włodzimierz Bojarski viewed the end of the Cold War as the start of a new wave of colonization (BOJARSKI 2002, QUOTED IN WISE 2010: 289). Likewise, nationalist critics in Poland assert that *“the end of Soviet hegemony has not eliminated the threat of colonial domination, especially in the form of a German-dominated EU”* (IBID.: 304). In the EU’s *“hegemonic neoliberal order,”* Poland’s national identity and business were threatened in the eyes of the nationalists (SHIELDS 2015: 663).

According to Tanja Börzel, one strategy of EU member states for *“maximiz[ing] the benefits and minimize[ing] the costs of European policies is to upload national policy arrangements to the European level”* (BÖRZEL 2002: 196). Like Western European norm-makers, CEE countries are keen to have their energy interests prioritized in the EU. For instance, to eliminate Russian influence, Poland proposed a Central Asian solution and advocated the establishment of an energy union. Nevertheless, not only did the related Nabucco pipeline fail to resonate with the EU and the US, but the energy union idea was taken credit for by the EU – the Energy Union, a project launched after Poland’s proposal, has had its priorities heavily influenced by Western European member states (AUSTVIK 2016). Given this, it is not a surprise that under the administration of the populist Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) party, *“[s]ome have even claimed that Western liberal ideas are not compatible with Polish traditions or identity”* (BURAS 2017: 3). After all, *“values are sovereign”* (MEMMI 1991). Although Poland, like other post-communist nations that sought EU membership, was *“willing to sacrifice, at least in terms of appearance, a proportion of its sovereignty that it had fought so hard to achieve less than two decades earlier”* (BROWN 2016: 86), the sacrifice was eventually deemed unpaid or only partially rewarded.

When CEE countries are increasingly dissatisfied with their status of being norm-takers, a burgeoning level of Euroscepticism follows suit. As Filippos Proedrou notes, *“the central and eastern European countries (the Visegrad Group, the Baltic states, Croatia and Romania) have been rather unaccommodating to the Commission’s plans for a green transition”* (PROEDROU 2017: 184). To give another case, as Poland views the EU’s climate change policies as a significant threat to its energy security and coal industry,

it is reluctant to follow the EU-led neoliberal approach (OSTROWSKI 2022). Consequently, Poland “has proved to be one of the most active – and vocal – critics of the EU’s energy and climate goals” (MIŠÍK – PRACHÁROVÁ 2021A: 10). Also, Hungary, when confronting excessive price inflation, renationalized its energy sectors, which, however, ran against the EU’s commitment to energy market liberalization (ISAACS – MOLNAR 2017: 108).

Notably, the CEE countries disagree with their Western European counterparts on external energy policies. Mathias Roth, in discussing Poland’s role as a policy entrepreneur in European external energy policy, writes, “[t]he misfit between Warsaw’s geopolitical priorities and established EU policy is particularly pronounced” (ROTH 2011: 601). The Nord Stream project is such a case in point. In contrast to Western European countries, such as Germany, Austria, France, and the Netherlands, CEE countries, particularly Poland, Slovakia, and the Baltic States, view Nord Stream 2 as a grave threat to their energy interests (ŁOSKOT-STRACHOTA – BAJCZUK – KARDAS’ 2018). The construction of the pipeline without consulting with Poland even “invoked its historical trauma and geopolitical security dilemma of being trapped between Germany and Russia” (ROTH 2011: 608).

Put briefly, perceived biases in EU norms have implicitly reinforced the CEE countries’ subalternity (HUIGEN – KOŁODZIEJCZYK 2023; O’SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). To bring neoliberal neo-colonialism to an end “requires a decolonization of the social imaginary from the ideology of growth” (KALLIS 2018: 180). That said, as a promising transition narrative, degrowth has the potential to bring about such a decolonization. As Jason Hickel reminds us, degrowth, broadly, is “a critique of the mechanisms of colonial appropriation, enclosure and cheapening that underpin capitalist growth itself” (HICKEL 2021: 2). For the CEE countries whose local interests have long been neglected, the degrowth theme, theoretically, has offered them a chance to counteract neoliberal neo-colonialism. Elisabetta Mocca (2020) contends that local-centric degrowth is both pragmatic and theoretical: “Drawing on actual practical examples of communal, anti-capitalist and ecological alternatives, degrowth proponents seek to build a persuasive argument about the centrality of the local dimension in the transition towards a degrowth society. Parallel to such pragmatic localism, theoretical accounts on degrowth explore communitarian and deep ecologist localist utopias to identify territorial forms that may suit a degrowth society” (IBID.: 84).

Whereas the theoretical dimension is indisputable, the pragmatic side takes time to effect since it is difficult, if not impossible, to convince the key beneficiaries to accept a new set of rules that might disadvantage them. Be that as it may, the CEE countries and others whose interests have long been marginalized would favor the degrowth theme since it can help prioritize their own agenda; otherwise, either a high compliance cost or an extra adaptation cost will inevitably be incurred.

Last but not least, degrowth, as it evolved from an activist slogan to “*an interpretative frame of a social movement*,” has great potential to change an otherwise hopelessly ossified society by contributing to knowledge production (DEMARIA ET AL. 2013). Insofar as the CEE countries vis-à-vis degrowth are concerned, some might contend that it would be too ambitious for these countries to jump into the degrowth phase. The epistemic bias should be discarded, however, since degrowth cannot be regarded as an exclusive privilege-cum-obligation of Western European countries. When the growth-led neoliberal doctrines still suppress the CEE countries’ sense of an authentic self, at least the degrowth pathway and the like have offered them alternatives to make a difference. Besides that, the degrowth-theme energy transition would allow us to repay the massive ecological debts accumulated in the Anthropocene.

CONCLUSIONS

The article examined two phases of energy neo-colonialism in CEE countries, arguing that, after the Cold War, the CEE countries have to manage Russia’s neo-colonial forces and the EU’s neoliberal neo-colonialist influence in their energy transitions. Although the CEE countries have reduced their reliance on the Russian influence by returning to Europe, the conditionality norms introduced by the EU have resulted a neoliberal neo-colonialism.

The unpleasant Soviet past has made the CEE countries more sensitive to energy security than their Western European counterparts. Besides Russia’s state-owned energy giants, such as Gazprom, the CEE countries must manage Russia-supported middle companies in their energy transitions. Given this, eliminating Russia’s influence in the energy sector is a complicated and, hence, ongoing process. In this aspect, the EU has

increased the CEE countries' weight vis-à-vis Russia by promoting “best practice,” but as Michael Keating, in discussing EU energy security, reminded us earlier, the exact meaning of it is very controversial (KEATING 2012: 101). In the CEE countries, in particular, the EU-led neoliberal approach has led to cognitive injustice, as evidenced by the growing level of Euroscepticism in them.

Despite the neoliberal neo-colonial predicament, the CEE countries seemingly have no alternative pathways for proceeding with their energy transitions. As Kallis observes, hardly any country would shift its economic development into degrowth “*since people will not accede to the material losses involved*” (KALLIS 2018: 161). Considering the CEE countries' relative economic backwardness and above-average economic growth compared with Western European countries, convincing them that the idea of degrowth would be viable seemingly has a slim chance of succeeding. In any event, however, a tough choice is still better than no choices.

More importantly, discussing the seemingly unrealistic degrowth scenario invites us “*to think and act outside of the box*” (SEKULOVA ET AL. 2013: 5). Besides, turning an idea that looks impossible into a feasible one is what a transition implies and what makes the otherwise laborious process meaningful and hopeful. If the region's energy-intensive industries had unwittingly ushered in the era in which environmental pollution became a major issue at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (AXELROD 1999: 288), the CEE countries could make a difference by giving the degrowth pathway a try since the idea, albeit currently a minoritarian position, can be well justified in the name of the greater good.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The CEE countries discussed in the article are limited to nine EU member states that accessed in 2004 and 2007, namely Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Despite each country having own unique features, they share similar and severe energy security concerns about Russian influence.
- 2 Hungary and Slovakia, however, have chosen to sustain the status quo, as they still count on Russian energy. Specifically, while Gazprom still plays a dominant role in Hungary, “*no significant changes have happened in [the] Slovak oil sector*” (Žuk et al. 2023: 6–8).
- 3 According to David Neilson, the aggressive nature of the neoliberal model of development, which prioritizes national competitiveness, has resulted in “*a zero-sum logic of*

international competition that expresses the contemporary logic of capitalism's uneven development" (Neilson 2020: 86).

- 4 Gurminder Bhambra and Peter Newell (2023) employ the invoked concept of *colonialism* to analyze climate colonialism, which, similarly to the abovementioned data colonialism, has been categorized as neo-colonialism in the article.
- 5 According to Ulrich Beck (1999: 5), both Western and non-Western societies are threatened by "a global equality of risk" emanating from industrial pollution, nuclear hazards, and other non-calculable threats.
- 6 For instance, the Czech Republic generously and presciently invested in the IKL (Ingolstadt–Kralupy–Litvinov) pipeline in the early 1990s. This pipeline connects it with the Germany energy network.
- 7 However, Poland's energy security, according to Wojciech Ostrowski (2021: 199), has not been dramatically altered since Warsaw mainly generates electricity by tapping into its abundant coal reserves.
- 8 European multi-national companies such as Germany's E.ON and RWE, the Italian ENI and the French companies EDF and GDF claimed large stakes in Hungary's domestic energy market.
- 9 He, however, has neglected the neoliberal panacea's side effect.
- 10 Nevertheless, such an act often comes with a high cost. For instance, Ostrowski (2021) notices that in 2006, Orlen, a Polish oil company, suffered a great loss after its buyout of the Lithuanian refinery Mazeikiiai, was sabotaged by the originally intended buyer, Russia, which then stopped delivering oil to the refinery. The pipeline previously delivering Russian oil to the refinery could not cost-effectively operate shortly after the sale was completed. Due to its huge cost, the aborted deal "is often hailed [as] the worst business deal in Polish history" (Gwiazdowski 2010, quoted in Ostrowski 2021: 203).
- 11 Besides developing an energy network, the other two pillars are the development of transport and digital networks, see <<https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>>.

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NOTE

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