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Editorial address: Nerudova 3, 118 50 Prague 1.

Editor's office telephone number: +420 251 108 140
web: cjir.iir.cz

Contact the editors for subscriptions and orders.
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Research Articles

Discussion Article Forum: Degrowth in Central and Eastern Europe

Book Review

Research Articles

Unveiling the War and Constructing Identities: Exploring Memes in Ukrainian and Russian Social Media during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

ALINA MOZOLEVSKA	Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, Mykolaiv, Ukraine
E-MAIL	alina.shkurat@gmail.com
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1550-8734

ABSTRACT	The article examines the generation and deployment of visual narratives in Ukrainian and Russian digital participatory cultures, with a specific focus on internet memes in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It analyzes the form, content, and functions of these memes and highlights their similarity in mobilizing and conveying political messages despite variations in their visual components. The study indicates that Ukrainian memes are used not only to promote political agendas but also serve as trauma coping and collective identity construction mechanisms in times of crisis, helping to promote new war narratives that are engaged in the construction of the self and the other.

KEYWORDS	participatory culture, popular culture, social media, memes, multimodal analysis, Russo-Ukrainian War
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INTRODUCTION

Roger Stahl, in his book *War, Media and Popular Culture*, posits that we are currently living in times of interactive wars, where the line between war and entertainment is more than ever *"permeable and negotiable, especially in a world saturated with electronic media"* (2009: 4). Indeed, the contemporary digital landscape determines not only how the wars are conducted, but also how they are experienced, communicated, and consumed (HOSKINS – SHCHELIN 2023). Today's Russia's war against Ukraine is no exception; digital technologies immediately transformed the war into content that is simultaneously processed by millions, enabling us to "see" and "live" the conflict *"through a prism of personalized realities"* (IBID.). These flows of all kinds of content, which are shared, remixed, liked or commented on, co-construct the digital world of war, creating new war ecologies (BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022), and providing a productive space for new symbols and stories of living the war to emerge. These flows also help to shape and disseminate new war narratives, framing the way we see both victims and aggressors. On this depends how we make sense of the war, how it will be remembered or forgotten, and how others will see Ukraine and Russia, whom they will support or which side they will ultimately take in the conflict.

Needless to say, in the modern history of conflicts, visuals have been used repeatedly as a part of information strategy or propaganda. Drawings, images, photographs, posters, cartoons, and maps represent a powerful tool of informing, but they can also act as a means for popular mobilization and political consolidation around a common goal. They serve not only to document the historical events, but to provide an ideological interpretation, idealizing the self and demonizing the enemy or shaping a global perspective of the conflict. With the emergence of digital media, new means of informing and shaping opinions appeared, dramatically increasing the amount of visual content coming from areas of conflict (MORTENSEN 2017: 1142). Indeed, the current Russo-Ukrainian War is incredibly visual; it immediately oversaturated the media with visual digital productions, documentary and artistic, which are coming from various sources and feeding the newsfeeds of millions of internet users (HOSKINS – SHCHELIN 2023). Due to the variety of artistic participatory responses of online communities and the creativity in the use of cultural memetic artifacts, the current war is often defined as a "meme war" and Ukrainians are called "a meme nation" (ADAMS 2022).

As Alexandra Brzozowski argues, today memes have become not only the new symbols of Ukrainian resistance and resilience, but also an unlikely source of varied digital activism and funding, as they counter Russian propaganda and support Ukrainian charities (BRZOZOWSKI 2022). Memes, in the form of both static and moving images, because of their ability to go viral and encapsulate political, social, or ideological commentary, are allowed to react rapidly to the changing reality of the wartime, framing the vision of the conflict.

The aim of this paper is to study the visual discursive dimension of the war and to analyze how visual artifacts of popular culture in Ukrainian and Russian social networks participate in the meaning-making and collective identity construction of the networked communities. The comparative perspective of the study allows one not only to see how epistemologies of the war are being created, but also to juxtapose the meaning-production process in the antagonistic cultural landscapes, which can help to reveal the different sets of visual means deployed to conceptualize the main war narratives and provide alternative interpretations of the war developments in Russian and Ukrainian social media. By analyzing the divergence in the meaning-making mechanisms and differences in iconography sources in Russian and Ukrainian participatory environments, the paper contributes to the existing discussions about the competing narratives regarding the common past and shared culture between Russia and Ukraine, which were significantly intensified by the Russian invasion (SHEVEL 2016, MÄLKSOO 2023). Special attention will be devoted to exploring national and international popular cultural references, while investigating their significance in rendering war-related issues visible and comprehensible within Russian and Ukrainian participatory cultures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous research of recent years has shown a growing interest in the analysis of the interrelation between society, popular culture, and social media (BOICHAK 2022; O'DOHERTY 2021; PRESS-BARNATHAN 2017; SCHULZ 2020; WOLFSFELD 2018). As Geert Lovink argues, to some extent, *"social networking becomes identical with the 'social' itself", reflecting the complexity of modern life and allowing one to analyze its different aspects from construction of solidarity, and social mobilization to polarization or manipulation through the study of ubiquitous*

user-generated discourses" (2019: 1). In the contemporary digital world, social media are examined as sites of the expression of power dynamics, where hegemonic struggles, social inequalities and cultural differences are visualized or rendered invisible (ROSE 2012: 23; SHIFMAN 2014: 119). Additionally, they are recognized as spaces for the emergence and construction of collective identities, bottom-up movements, and digital activism through participatory digital practices (GAL ET AL. 2016; JOHANN ET AL. 2023).

The increasing ubiquity of visual images in the digital landscape of social media, stimulates researchers to engage critically with the visual culture and elaborate new approaches to analyzing the ways visual artifacts are being produced, circulated, and perceived (ROSE 2012; SHIFMAN 2014; WIGGINS 2019). In recent studies, the pivotal role of visual culture artifacts is seen not only in their ability to bare political meanings or express ideologies, but also in their ability to possess their own agency in generating new meanings, evoking emotional responses, or establishing shared codes within specific communities (CALLAHAN 2020: 19). The potential of visuals to become a repository and site for collective identity construction represents one of the most studied aspects of the contemporary participatory culture (DECOOK 2018; GAL ET AL. 2016; GIORGI 2021). Following Eisenstadt and Giessen, the collective identity can be understood as a process of constant construction of in-group and out-group boundaries through social, cultural, or other performative practices (1995: 74–75). The core of this process consists in the production of a sense of belonging through the creation of symbolic codes of distinction between the self and the other (IBID.: 76). This ongoing dynamic of exclusion and inclusion enables the recurring production and validation of norms, values, and beliefs through discourse, defining the social, cultural, and political positioning of a community within a wider socio-political context (GAL ET AL. 2016: 1699). Similarly to other forms of cultural construction of difference and sameness, visual popular art, including memes, is considered a powerful identity building device (DECOOK 2018). It stimulates identification, evokes emotions, and gives a shared voice to members of networked communities (MORTENSEN – NEUMAYER 2021: 2369). However, popular culture visual productions can also act as a means of differentiation by sharpening the group boundaries, contributing to the sense of we-ness, and at the same time facilitating the exclusion of the other (GAL 2019).

The concept of meme was originally introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) in an attempt to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena in society. According to Dawkins, the term meme refers to a piece of cultural information that is replicated, initiated, and transmitted from one member of a society to another. With the advent of digital media, the term meme has been revived by Internet users to refer their everyday cultural activities (GAL ET AL. 2016: 1700). Memes, which are now considered fundamental *"artifacts of participatory digital culture"* (WIGGINS 2019: 40) due to their capacity to be widely shared and remixed by Internet audiences, encapsulate some of the most essential aspects of contemporary digital culture, which makes them *"the defining events of the twenty-first century"* (SHIFMAN 2014: 4). Being a common practice among internet users, memes are a unique phenomenon that can relate to various socio-political contexts and *"blend pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways"* (IBID.: 4). According to Wiggins and Bowers, memes can be categorized as a new genre of popular culture. A meme can be defined as *"a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of [a] participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity"* (2019: 11).

The literature review indicated that internet memes as a part of digital popular art and a practice of social media communication, have generated significant scholarly attention. Some scholars proposed to study the potential of memes as a means of political communication and participation (BASPEHLIVAN 2023; MAHAR – MAHMOOD 2021; BEBIĆ – VOLAREVIC 2018; ROSS – RIVERS 2016) or as effective and affective tools of propaganda (NIEUBUURT 2021; CIUREL 2021; BJOLA 2017). Others focus on the investigation of activism and polarization through the use of memes (BOGERTS – FIELITZ 2019; MAKHORTYKH – AGUILAR 2020). The visual framing of war has also been explored in prior studies, but it is worth noting that despite a significant expansion of the visual representation of conflicts in art and popular culture, a vast body of literature has focused mainly on the exploration of monumental, photographic, and cinematographic artworks (BOGGS – POLLARD 2016; BIRKENSTEIN 2010; HARRIS – OMER-SHERMAN 2013; ADLER ET AL. 2019). Researchers have only recently taken an interest in the potential of memetic digital artworks for visualizing war narratives (MAKHORTYKH 2015; MAKHORTYKH – GONZÁLEZ-AGUILAR 2020; GONZÁLEZ-AGUILAR – MAKHORTYKH 2022; PETERS – ALLAN 2022; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023; MUNK 2023; YEHOROVA ET AL. 2023). A closer examination of the literature on weaponization of memes reveals a lack of consideration of their use prior to the beginning of the

full-scale invasion in 2022. Still, some research was conducted on the use of memes during the initial stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014 (WIGGINS 2016; BERTAZZOLI 2019; MAKHORTYKH – SYDOROVA 2017). After February 2022, however, Ukrainian digital participatory culture as a means of resistance and resilience gained significant media attention (ANTONIUK 2022; MANOR 2022; ROMANO 2022 AND OTHERS).

In academia, both international (GÓRA – MOCZOŁ 2022) and Ukrainian perspectives (CHERNIAVSKA 2022; KOVALCHUK – LITKOVYCH 2022; KHARCHENKO 2023; RAKITYANSKAYA 2023; YEHOROVA ET AL. 2023) of the war's mediatization through popular culture, gained particular attention from scholars. Their analysis investigates the functions of memetic imagery of the Russo-Ukrainian war in different national contexts as well as the transformation of the Ukrainian media and political space during the times of war. Additionally, certain authors offer theoretical perspectives on the specific role of popular culture and memetic warfare in the Russo-Ukrainian war, seeing them as an element of geopolitics (LASSIN 2023), a strategy of international diplomacy (BUDNITSKY 2023; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023) or a form of resistance (MUNK 2023). However, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of scientific reflection on the comparative perspective of the analysis of the digital memetic space in Ukraine and Russia. Therefore, there is a pressing need to understand how Ukrainian and Russian visual popular culture responds to the Russo-Ukrainian War, and how it reshapes and generates war narratives and constructs the vision of the self and the other. The 24th of February 2022 serves as a focal point which marks the rupture between the life before and the life after. Although the war began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbass, the scale of the current Russian invasion has directly impacted on the response of participatory culture and altered the means of constructing a new geopolitical and socio-economic reality.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The dataset used in the analysis comprises 850 visuals obtained from Ukrainian and Russian online communities since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. As the analysis aimed to compare strategies for using memes in digital communication among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups, the criteria for selection depended on the political

orientation of the group members and administrators of online communities. Several pro-Kremlin and pro-Ukrainian groups on Vkontakte, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram that regularly post visual content, were included in the analysis. Some of the groups existed prior to February 2022 – for example, the Ukrainian Facebook page *Fayni Memy* or the Russian Vkontakete group *Chto tam u hohlov?* – while the creation of other groups, such as the Russian telegram channel Z-Memes and the Ukrainian Museum of War Humor, was directly triggered by the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The memes were manually collected from the following Ukrainian and Russian groups starting from February 2022: Ukraine – *Fayni Memy*, Euromaidan Art, Museum of War Humor, Ukrainian Memes, and Meme Forces of Ukraine; Russia – *Chto tam u hohlov?*, Zapadenets news, *Chto tam u hohlyh?*, Z-Memes, and Digital Satire.[1] The mentioned social media communities have between 7 and 60 thousand followers and the users actively engage in sharing, commenting on, and reacting to group posts containing visual, textual and audiovisual content. It should be noted that new posts are published daily and due the abundance of the material, the author collected visuals at intervals of one week to ten days to obtain varied data triggered by various events of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Initially, the memes published in the main posts were extracted. Then the comments to these posts were also examined to collect other memes posted in response to the initial message. In total, social media networks provided 850 memes, 423 for pro-Ukrainian and 427 for pro-Kremlin groups. It is worth noting that the groups selected for the analysis were created for the given domestic audience, specifically for Ukrainians and Russians, which makes certain memes highly dependent on cultural contexts that are difficult to understand for the larger audience unfamiliar with Ukrainian and/or Russian culture and history. However, the data also comprises a limited number of memes targeted at a wider international audience.

To analyze the discursive power of memes during the Russo-Ukrainian War while taking into consideration their heterogeneous composition (the visual and textual component), the paper used the Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (O'HALLORAN 2011) combined with a quantitative content analysis, which allowed the author to study the interrelation between the verbal and textual part of the meme, as well as to reveal the potential of the visual imagery of these cultural artifacts. Special attention was given to the semiotic symbolism of the memes, following Kress and

van Leeuwen's approach to semiotic analysis of multimodal communication (2006, 2012). At the first stage, with the help of the coding and content analysis, the memes were classified based on their form (only their visual and verbal form) and type of content (the main narratives and discursive topics). Furthermore, the memes were separated into different subgroups according to their content features. During the second stage, some key discursive topics were identified to complete the classification of the memes – construction of the self, construction of the other, shaping the war reality, shaping global politics, and non-war-related memes. This approach also allowed the author to single out the frequency of the use of specific persons, characters, images and symbols as well as their relations to each other. At the final stage, the main characteristics of the memes in each subgroup were studied.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

At the first stage of our empirical analysis, the form of the Ukrainian and Russian memes was examined. The analysis has revealed that most of the memes have a mixed structure and contain visual and verbal information, while visual memes represent only 10 and 12 percent of the meme content of the Russian and Ukrainian groups, respectively. The presence of the verbal component may be attributed to the possibility to remix and construct diverse ideological messages using the same visual source. Interestingly, some of the visual references are used by both Russian and Ukrainian users to create war-related memes. In this case, the visual basis for the construction of the memes is derived from the global popular culture, and the images are then easily adaptable to various discursive situations. For example, such memes as Peter Parker's Glasses, Trollface, Woman Yelling at a Cat, Distracted Boyfriend, Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man, Galaxy Brain and Batman Slapping Robin are productive sources of meme creation for both Ukrainian and Russian participatory culture. Furthermore, various cartoon and movie remixes from world popular culture (mostly American and Soviet cinema and animation) also represent a rich source for meme production in Ukrainian and Russian participatory culture which allows one to shape the messages using easily recognizable symbols.

Other sources of graphic material for memes rely on different historical narratives (for example, graphic materials related to WWII or the Great

Patriotic War for both memetic cultures, the Soviet period for Russia, and the Cossack times for Ukraine), or sometimes the memes are inspired by contemporary geopolitical situations or national and international political leaders (European political leaders, the President of the United States, as well as Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin are largely used in the process of meme production). The Russian invasion itself proved to be a rich source for visual content in both the Ukrainian and the Russian participatory culture. In this case, the memes are usually based on significant events of the war, such as, for example, the imprisonment of Medvedchuk, the liberation of Snake Island and the attack on the Crimea Bridge for the Ukrainian participatory culture, and the occupation of Kherson, the annexation of Ukrainian territories and the massive missile attacks and blackouts in autumn 2022 and winter 2022–2023 for the Russian participatory culture. They are typically intended to celebrate victories or deconstruct the image of the enemy, serving as propaganda or counter-propaganda during times of war. In the context of Ukraine, the war-related memes also represent an attempt to cope with the traumatic war reality through humor and remediation of a shared experience. Indeed, humor has already been established as an effective coping and emotion regulation mechanism during a conflict or crisis in previous studies. It has been demonstrated that it is widely used to voice anxiety or frustration, react to the violence and strengthen ingroup connections (GAVRILOVIC ET AL. 2003; GORGULA 2016; KORKUT ET AL. 2022). The war-time Ukrainian humor propagated through memes also served as an element of political communication and a means of resilience, which was analyzed by recent studies (YEHOROVA ET AL. 2023). Essentially, the variety of meme content drawn from diverse historical, political, and cultural sources reflects the complex and dynamic nature of participatory cultures in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The data in the table below provides insights into the sources of visual elements used in meme construction, comparing Ukrainian and Russian memes.

TABLE 1: MAIN GRAPHIC ELEMENTS

Main graphic elements	Ukrainian memes	Russian memes
Historical narratives	90	151
Political personalities	77	111
Military personalities (Gerasimov, Zaluzhnyy) and events	102	79
Cartoon remixes	40	22
Movie remixes	64	20
Animalistic remixes	17	26

Others	12	18
Total	423	427

Source: Author.

The most productive categories of the graphic content are historical narratives, contemporary geopolitical contexts, and popular culture, which account for 88 and 90 percent of the Ukrainian and Russian meme datasets respectively. Only 4 and 6 percent of the data is made up of animalistic remixes respectively. In this case, the natural world serves as the inspiration for the creation of memetic content. Animals are frequently utilized as symbolic representations of countries – e.g. the bear as the symbol of the Russian Federation, and smaller animals (cats, racoons, bees) representing Ukraine to illustrate the disparity between the Russian and Ukrainian armies. They are also used to counter some of the Russian propagandistic narratives, like when images of militarized ducks and pigeons are used as a counter-narrative in response to Russia's assertion that the Ukrainian Armed Forces use animals as biological weapons. The memes not fitting into the aforementioned categories constitute only 2.8 and 4.2 percent of the datasets respectively.

Another peculiar aspect of the collected data is the presence of content that cross-fertilizes the memescapes of Russian and Ukrainian internet communities. In this case, certain images which were created by Ukrainian or Russian internet users or cartoonists are used in different national participatory cultures to advance their respective narratives. For instance, the Russian VK community remixed a cartoon by the Ukrainian artist Alensander Nikityuk created in 2022 (Fig. 1) which compares the behavior of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. The illustration was made after the discovery of the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Bucha and Irpin and it focuses on portraying the Russian soldiers as looters and war criminals. By simply switching the flags on the soldiers' uniforms, Russian internet users managed to represent Ukrainian soldiers in a negative light. Additionally, the remix strives to depict the Ukrainian army as endorsing Nazi movements and being controlled by NATO, which is illustrated by the badge on the soldier's belt and the symbol on the helmet. It is worth noting that Russian remixes utilizing Ukrainian popular culture are infrequent, with only five examples found in the dataset. Similar examples of image appropriation can be also observed within the Ukrainian

dataset. For instance, the Russian *schwainokaras* (pigfish)[2] meme has been widely utilized by the Russian participatory culture since 2014 as a symbol meant to denigrate Ukrainians, who are often depicted as pigs in Russian pro-Kremlin social media groups, but later, the Ukrainian meme community adopted this meme as a humorous representation of the self, resulting in thousands of variations within Twitter and Facebook communities.

FIGURE 1: LEFT – A CARTOON BY ALEKSANDER NIKITYUK, RIGHT – A REMIX BY A RUSSIAN PC

Source: 1 – <https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

Other examples of such borrowings include memes created using screenshots from Russian and Ukrainian news, photographs of official Russian and Ukrainian political meetings, as well as images of Ukrainian stamps and NAFO,[3] which are utilized for remixes in both participatory cultures. Typically, such borrowings are employed in two types of scenarios – either to challenge the narrative of the other participatory culture or to use expressive imagery of the other to promote one's own narratives.

In some cases, Ukrainian and Russian memes draw from similar visual representations of historical events and make use of identical symbolic images of heroes and villains. For example, Figure 2 demonstrates how a single image is employed in both the Russian and the Ukrainian community to actualize the narrative of World War II/the Great Patriotic War and demonize the image of the other. The shared experience of the German invasion in the two countries allows one to easily decode the main message of the meme. In the Russian version of the meme, it draws a parallel between Volodymyr Zelensky's personality and Adolf Hitler's image, framing the Special Military Operation as a fight against Nazis in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian version of the meme compares the Russian

aggression to the German invasion, drawing a connection between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hitler.

FIGURE 2: LEFT – HITLER IN THE REFLECTION, RUSSIAN REMIX, RIGHT – HITLER IN THE REFLECTION, UKRAINIAN REMIX

Source: 1 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>, 2 – <https://t.me/ukraners>.

Further we identified the main discursive topics in the Russian and Ukrainian memescape that contribute to the construction of the visual discourse of the war. These themes include the construction of the self, the construction of the other, shaping of the war reality, and shaping of (global) politics. The dataset also contains a small number of non-war-related memes (approximately 4 percent). They are not related to any war events and do not convey any pro- or anti-war messages. Instead, they serve the purpose of facilitating communication within the group or generating comical effects. The contrast in thematic distribution can be demonstrated through the following table:

TABLE 2: MAIN DISCURSIVE TOPICS

Main discursive topics	Ukrainian memes	Russian memes
constructing the self	86	79
construction of the other	126	175
shaping the war reality	115	44
shaping (global) politics	80	110
non-war-related memes	16	20
Total	423	427

Source: Author.

As we can observe, the Ukrainian participatory culture prominently features memes that shape the perception of the enemy and construct a new reality for its people. These two categories reflect key existential issues that Ukrainians have faced since the beginning of the full-scale

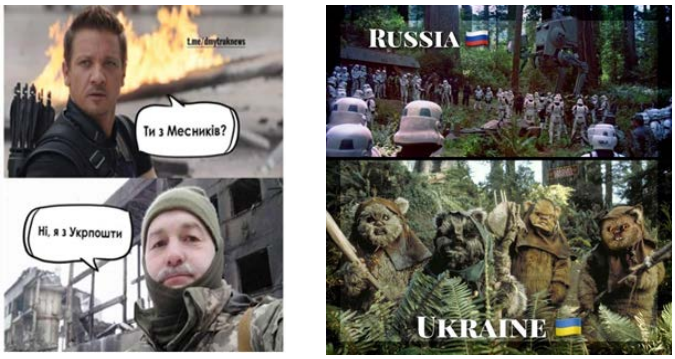
invasion: how to make sense of the war and adjust to the new reality. In the context of Russia, a plethora of memes exist which reflect the geopolitical situation and contribute to the formation of the image of the other.

One of the largest thematic groups of memes, which is extensively shared among Ukrainian and Russian internet communities, consists of memes that re-actualize existing narratives and establish new ones to shape the collective identity. The analysis indicates that Ukrainian memes are largely influenced by global popular culture and the country's cultural or historical context. Many of the memes are connected to significant events in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. They remix images from drone footage, frontline photos, and materials published in Russian media. Thus, Ukrainian communities use a range of visual elements from multiple sources to represent the collective self and reflect the complexity of the current war.

Ukrainian internet users are actively incorporating popular Western cultural symbols into their efforts to visually portray the Ukrainian army and demonstrate the resilience and resistance of the Ukrainian civilian population. References to well-known figures such as the Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Neo from Matrix, and characters from franchises like The Avengers, Commandos, Star Wars, and Lord of the Rings are frequently used to construct a positive image of Ukrainians. In most cases, Ukrainians align themselves with the emblematic representatives of the forces of good, incorporating such positive qualities as bravery, endurance, courage, strength, and fearlessness in the collective vision of the self. Such virtues, predominately associated with stereotyped representations of male heroes (ANDERSON 2008), help to build the generalized heroic image of the Ukrainian army and soldiers based on masculinity traits. However, it should be noted that in numerous instances, depictions of heroes are contextualized through specific situations within the Russo-Ukrainian War to create an immediate connection between the cultural reference employed and the ongoing conflict. As noted by Bigazzi et al. (2023) during their analysis of another geopolitical context, this anchoring to concrete situations of life help to make the heroes less abstract and more real. Moreover, by aligning themselves with universally recognized positive characters from popular culture who lead the battle against a universal evil, often in an unequal fight, Ukrainians can not only co-construct the image of the self,

which is understandable for in-groups of different ages, but also use a universal visual language to convey the message to a wider outgroup audience. This stylistic choice also implicitly constructs the negative image of the other, connecting it to the negative and evil forces that superheroes fight against. It also highlights the valor of Ukrainians, showcasing their ability to successfully resist a more powerful enemy despite the disparity of the military potential of Ukraine and that of Russia. Additionally, this approach not only depicts the conflict as a Ukrainian fight for freedom but frames it as a global issue and a struggle for universal human values. The heroization of the discourse of the self can be illustrated by the following examples:

FIGURE 3: POPULAR CULTURE REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1, 2 – <https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>.

Another productive source of the construction of the self within the Ukrainian participatory culture is found in the historical narratives of Ukraine's Cossack period. The warriors of Zaporizka Sich, known for their bravery and love for freedom, are often invoked to complete the image of the soldiers in the Ukrainian army. These images, clear and transparent to the majority of the Ukrainian population, establish connections between current events of the war and other periods of the fight for freedom and independence in Ukrainian history. These images help emphasize essential qualities of the warriors such as courage, audacity, love for the motherland and determination. The Cossack memes frequently integrate components of popular culture with war-related material, enabling the creation of a hybridized narrative that blends the past and the present historical events. For example, the image on the left in Figure 4 depicts

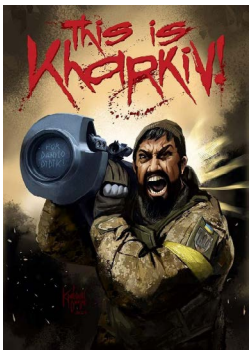
the Ukrainian Cossacks, the characters of a popular children's cartoon, as soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces:

FIGURE 4: COSSACK REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE

Source: 1, 2 – <https://t.me/ukrainearmedmemes>.

In addition, new symbols and visual representations of the self are being created during the developments of the war. The stories of everyday heroism, like the civil protests in Kherson or the resistance of civilians in many other regions, and the legends from the battlefield, such as the story of the Ghost of Kyiv, the heroic defense of Kyiv and Kharkiv in the first days, or the de-occupation of Kherson, have become a part of the collective vision of the self and were reflected in popular culture. Memes serve as a universal language of communication with which to share collective trauma and foster new war narratives. For instance, the visual discourse embraces and reflects the stories of the Ukrainian tractor stealing Russian tanks, the Konotop witches, the Chernobaivka area where Russian forces were attacked numerous times and of the granny who hit a Russian drone with a tomato jar. Again, these remixes often join elements of Western popular culture with the current war context of Ukrainians in order to make the images more recognizable and accessible to wider audiences, and also intensify the symbolic power of the images. In addition, many memes based on war-related events serve to perpetuate a divide between the self and the enemy:

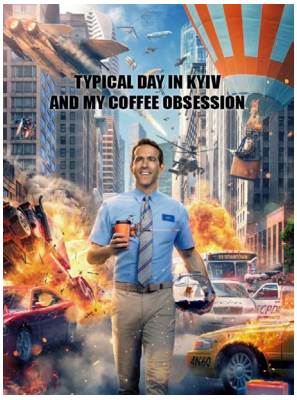
FIGURE 5: WAR-RELATED EVENT REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1 – <https://www.facebook.com/faynimemy>, 2 – <https://t.me/ukraners>.

Another crucial aspect of the self-representation is the visual construction of the everyday reality of Ukrainians during the war. It is noteworthy that the visual discourse not only reflects military advances but also drastic changes in the lives of millions of civilians. While the Russian visual discourse omits the real horrors of the war that the Ukrainian population endures, in Ukrainian digital media the construction of the self is closely tied to the war-time reality of the Russo-Ukrainian War, including countless missile attacks, bombings, and power outages, as evidenced by the Ukrainian memescape. In the early days of the war, efforts were primarily focused on addressing the trauma and shock caused by the war and adjusting to the new reality. As the conflict progressed, however, the attention shifted to promoting resilience, adaptability, and heroism among average Ukrainians.

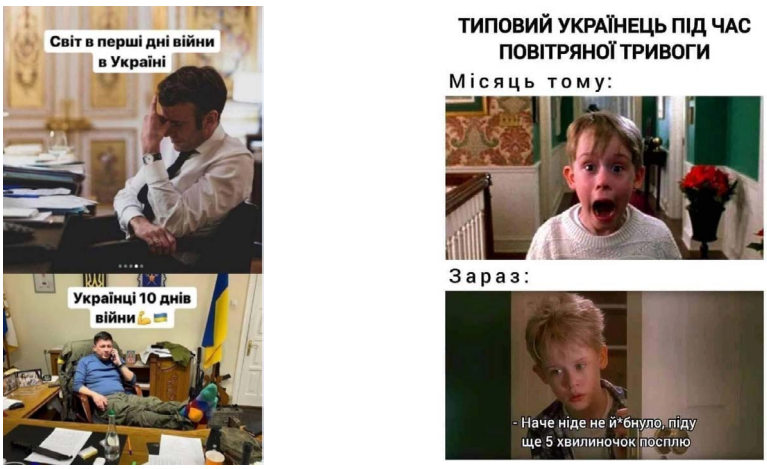
FIGURE 6: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE



Source: 1, 2 – <https://t.me/ukraners>.

Humor plays a vital role in the trauma processing mechanisms, as it helps Ukrainians to live through the difficult war-time reality. Many memes use satire, self-irony, post-irony or dark humor to depict the daily life amid the attacks of the Russian army. Often life in Ukraine today is compared to the everyday routine before the invasion or the typical reality in other countries, particularly in the Russian Federation or Western countries. This contrast highlights the peaceful life beyond the borders of Ukraine versus the struggles faced by the local population.

FIGURE 7: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, UKRAINE

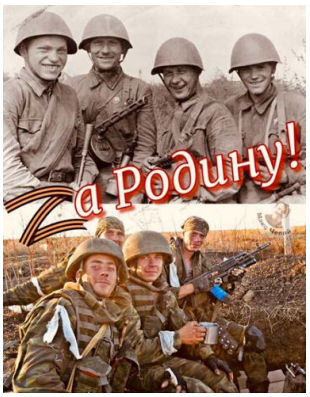


Source: 1 – <https://t.me/ukrainearmedmemes>, 2 – <https://t.me/ukraners>.

The Russian pro-Kremlin visual discourse appears to lack diversity in the selection of visual means for the self-representation. It is strongly focused on the historical framing of the "special military operation", its narrativization through the lens of World War II and the myth of the Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War. The representation of the self is frequently conceptualized through remixed images of Soviet soldiers combined with a symbol of the Soviet Union or Russia. In this way, the digital media aim to create continuity between the events and personalities of the Great Patriotic War and today's invasion of Ukraine. It is possible to assume that this type of memetic image is utilized to support and propagate strategic state narratives – these images propagate the claim that by invading Ukraine, Russian soldiers will protect their own lands and 'liberate' their neighbor from the Nazi regime and, in this way, repeat the feat of their ancestors. The historical associations are expressed both visually and verbally. For example, in the first image of Figure 8, the text

"The year 45 is in the past but the fire of that war is here" contains a direct allusion to the events of the Great Patriotic War, while the photograph depicts Russia's current war. Both examples also illustrate how new symbols of the war (e.g. the letter Z) are combined with the heroic symbols of the previous historical period (e.g. the ribbon of St. George) so as to visually relate the events of World War II to Russia's war against Ukraine.

FIGURE 8: HISTORICAL REMIXES, CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/zapadeneznews>.

It is important to note that the analyzed Russian social media communities primarily emphasize the visualization of the image of the Russian soldier as a key hero of the war and the main symbol of the collective self. Along with Soviet symbols of the Great Patriotic War, positive characters from Soviet cartoons, such as Cheburashka, play a significant role in shaping the collective identity in pro-Kremlin communities. Their purpose is to create a sense of detachment from the Western culture of "unfriendly countries" while simultaneously blending the cultural symbols of the Soviet era with those of modern-day Russia. Also, the animalistic self-representation commonly found within the Russian participatory culture associates the image of a bear, a symbol of the Russian Federation, with the soldier. The bear-warrior is usually portrayed as a strong and aggressive animal, a symbol of bravery and fearlessness.

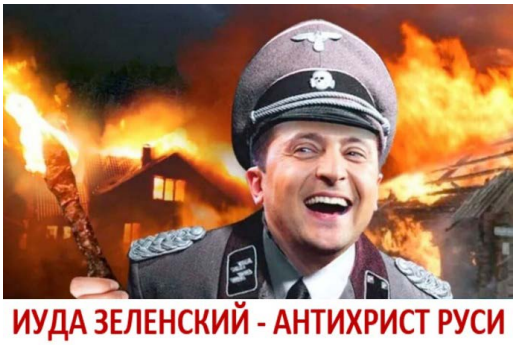
FIGURE 9: CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF, RUSSIA, LEFT – CARTOON REMIX, RIGHT – ANIMALISTIC REMIX

Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

In the discursive spaces of Russian and Ukrainian social media, the image of the self is inevitably opposed to the construction of the other as *"the Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa"* (STASZAK 2009). This involves not only the juxtaposition of heroes and villains, a key strategy employed in war discourses (LAINESTE – FIADOTAVA 2023), but also the construction of the whole group of others as inferior, amoral, repulsive and unpleasant. While Russian media shape the image of the other, there is a strong tendency on their part to historicize the conflict and present it as a historic fight against fascism, American hegemony, or the collective West – depending on the target audience. This serves to create and strengthen the narrative of Russia's sacred struggle against a big evil. Using this narrative, Russian social media attempt to rally people against a common enemy and encourage users to support the Special Military Operation more actively. This war narrative is deeply rooted in the myth of the Great Patriotic War, and slogans of the past war are frequently paired with remixed images from present days. The main messages include the phrases "Победа будет за нами" – "Victory will be ours", "За победу" – "For victory", or "С нами правда" – "The truth is ours". These mobilization motifs are also constructed visually with retrospective images of the Great Patriotic War to shape the image of the enemy. There is also a tendency to disseminate homogenized images of the other, namely Ukrainians, based on historical symbols of the collective evil and stereotypical perceptions of the other nation. Ukrainians are often portrayed as an unintelligent and limited nation, as prone to bad habits like alcohol addiction, and as people who lack the ability to think for themselves and are easily manipulated by others. This way of depicting Ukrainians is not a recent development, but rather it became more pronounced after Russia's annexation of Crimea and military occupation of Donbass in 2014.

Ukrainians are often demonized; they are depicted as puppets of the Western countries seduced by "false" European values or as supporters of Nazism who seek to harm their own country. The historical narrative of the fight against the fascist regime and references to World War II occupy a central role in the construction of the image of the other in the Russian participatory culture:

FIGURE 10: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <https://t.me/dfhumor>.

Furthermore, Ukrainian national symbols, including the trident, the colors blue and yellow, and vyshyvanka, are often fused with the symbols of Nazi Germany to promote the historical narrative of Russia as a country-"liberator" and create a direct link between the fight against Ukraine and the struggle against Nazism. Moreover, this tendency to create a negative image of the other through the Nazi narrative not only encompasses the Ukrainian military and select categories of the Ukrainian population, but also extends towards civilians. The following examples illustrate this statement and show how such vulnerable categories as children or the elderly people can also be portrayed negatively.

FIGURE 11: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA

Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>.

The use of dehumanizing rhetoric and animal imagery on Russian social media platforms intensifies the construction of a generalized negative image of Ukrainians. It reflects common practices of the construction of the enemy that were observed during other historical periods (STEUTER – WILLS 2009). As Dave Grossman explains: *"It is so much easier to kill someone if they look distinctly different than you. If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are not really human but are 'inferior forms of life,' then their natural resistance to killing their own species will be reduced"* (GROSSMAN 1996: 17). In other words, the animal imagery creates the psychological distance between the groups of us and them, resulting in the moral exclusion of the other, who is seen as inferior, evil, or criminal (OPOTOW 2005). On Russian social media, the dehumanizing rhetoric is implemented through the depiction of Ukrainians as pigs. Such a visual symbol is not chosen by accident, as the cultural representations of this animal are often derogatory, since it is traditionally linked with dirtiness or greed. Such personification repeatedly promotes the idea of the inferiority of the other. Ukrainians-pigs are created to evoke negative emotions among internet users such as hatred and disgust. In the Russian visual discourse, Ukrainians-pigs are dirty, fat, scruffy, and stupid; they serve only to feed others. This dehumanizes Ukrainians and implies that they exist just to serve others and should be killed for the common good without any remorse. By choosing this visual representation of Ukrainians, the users deprive the other of human traits, and negative emotions dominate the focus of the audience and leave no room for empathy or compassion towards the other, making it easier to justify their destruction.

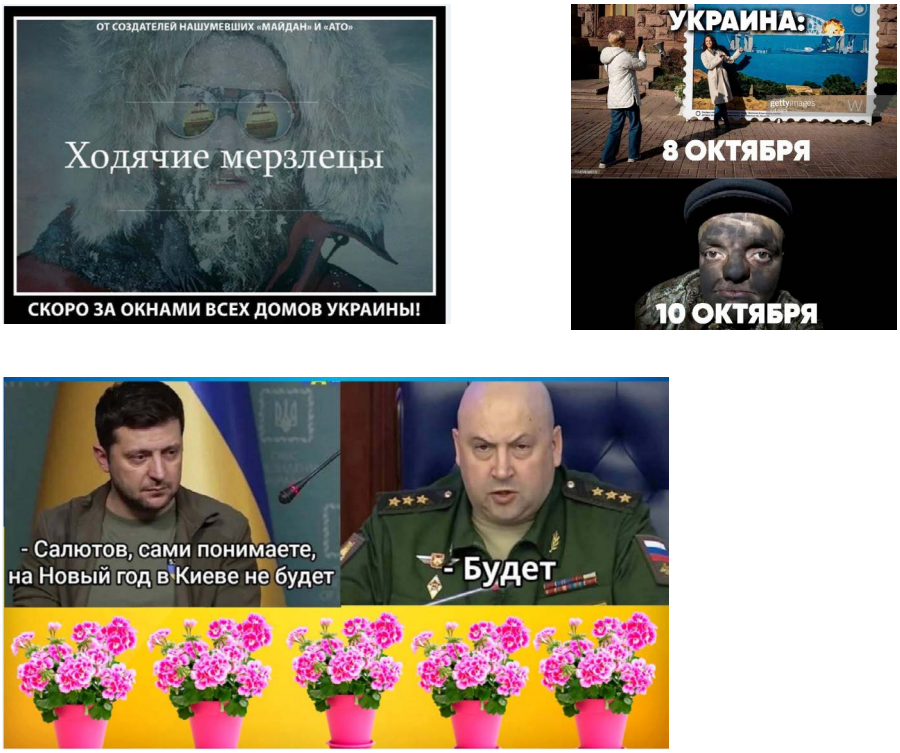
FIGURE 12: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA

Source: 1 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u>, 2 – <https://t.me/Z_memes>.

Generally, Ukrainians are associated with negative cultural and historical aspects to generate the hatred towards them and legitimize the aggressive actions of the Kremlin regime. This way of constructing the other aligns with official Russian propaganda which claims that Ukrainians are not a real nation, and Ukraine is not an independent state and is instead controlled by the USA and NATO, and therefore lacks the right to exist.

Interestingly, the perception of Ukrainians in Russian social media is also shaped through the visualization of their everyday war reality. Memes that mockingly depict how Ukrainians endure the challenges brought about by the war, namely the blackouts and massive missile attacks in late 2022 and early 2023, serve to downplay the suffering of the Ukrainian civilian population, and Ukrainians are portrayed as deserving of punishment and the Russian army's accomplishments are glorified in this way.

FIGURE 13: SHAPING THE WAR REALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, RUSSIA



Source: 1, 2 – <https://vk.com/chto_tam_u, 3 - https://t.me/dfhumor>.

In the Ukrainian digital media, the construction of the other is closely connected with real-time events of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The failures of the Russian army, such as its retreat from the Kyiv region; the counter-offensive in Kharkiv and the Kherson areas and other successes of the Ukrainian army, are used to challenge the myth of Russia as a great military superpower and highlight the difference between Russia's propaganda and the reality on the battlefield. In this category of memes, Russia is often symbolically represented in an animalistic manner, as a two-headed eagle or a bear is used to represent the state and its army. Additionally, political and military figures such as Putin or Russian generals are productive sources for the remixes for the presentation of the other.

FIGURE 14: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE

Source: 1 – <https://www.facebook.com/euromaidanart>, 2 – <https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>.

In the Ukrainian visual discourse, Russian soldiers are presented in two main narratives. The first narrative is focused on the weakness and incompetence of the Russian army, while the second narrative centers on the cruelty and brutality of the soldiers, making visible the cases of crimes and looting committed by the Russian army. Numerous memes are targeted at the deconstruction and dehumanization of the image of the enemy. Often, some individuals are taken as symbolic examples of the failures and incompetence of the Russian army. For instance, in the first weeks of the war, a photograph of an unknown young Russian soldier nicknamed Chmonya was used for many remixes to shape the image of the other. Such depictions bolstered the positive mood of Ukrainians and their faith in victory in the face of a more powerful enemy. Another tendency consists in the dehumanization of the other. Russian soldiers are often represented as monsters, zombies or orcs, as some mythic creatures, but not humans.

It could be interpreted as an attempt to rationalize or find an explanation for the "inhuman", violent behavior of Russian troops on the Ukrainian territory and create distance between the aggressor and the self.

FIGURE15: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE

Source: 1 – <https://t.me/ukraners>, 2 – <https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>.

The fact of looting is also reflected in the visual discourse as one of the ways to mock at Russian soldiers. For example, the following memes illustrate this focus on the negative actions of the Russian army.

FIGURE 16: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER, UKRAINE

Source: 1, 2 – <https://t.me/ukraners>.

In the Ukrainian social media community, a focus on history can also be traced. During the initial stage of the full-scale invasion, there were a number of memes that constructed the other through the lens of the narrative of World War II. In this case, the Russian army is compared to the German Nazi soldiers, and the Russian president Vladimir Putin

to the personality of Adolf Hitler. In this way the image of the Russian Federation is bound to the fight against fascism that is rooted in the collective memory of Ukrainians. In contrast to the Russian visual discourse, Ukrainian memes provide a larger historical perspective on the aggressions committed by Russia against other nations and countries. For example, certain memes establish a link between Russia's war against Ukraine and the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, and Syria.

FIGURE 17: CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER

Source: 1 – <https://www.facebook.com/euromaidanart>, 2 – <https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the wartime memescape developed by the Ukrainian and Russian participatory digital cultures in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The analysis demonstrates that popular culture artifacts triggered by the war play a significant role in forging collective identities of the sides of conflict by contrasting the images of the self and the other and framing the war. In both participatory cultures, the Russo-Ukrainian War is framed as a battle between good and evil, but the sources used for the symbolic construction of the struggle differ. The Ukrainian visual discourse heavily relies on universal and Western popular culture references to construct the self and the other, while the Russian participatory environment tends to contextualize the conflict historically. The social reality of the war is being shaped through remixes of varied types of visual material, such as historical photographs, screenshots from the official news or footage from the battlefield, films, or cartoons.

It is worth noting that within the Ukrainian visual discourse, the narrative of the construction of the new reality is more present, and internet users more frequently repost memes that reflect brutal changes of reality or the everyday resistance of ordinary Ukrainians. In contrast, the Russian visual discourse primarily focuses on visualizing the geopolitical situation and constructing the negative perception of the other. This is probably because the Ukrainian population was directly affected by the destructive consequences of the war. Millions were displaced or lived through losses of friends or family members, whereas the reality of many Russians did not significantly change. Thus, the Ukrainian participatory culture responded to the necessity of processing traumatic experiences of war aggression.

The image of the self is more diverse in Ukrainian popular culture than in the Russian one, as it not only encompasses the creation of heroic figures on the battlefield, but also features multiple depictions of everyday life and the resistance of common Ukrainians. The Ukrainian visual discourse predominantly focuses on illustrating current events of the war by showcasing new heroes and victories of the Ukrainian army. In contrast, the Russian meme discourse typically relates the narrative of the Great Patriotic War to the current invasion of Ukraine, thereby reflecting on the past.

Popular culture remains a significant resource for remixes in Ukrainian and Russian social media. However, Ukrainian internet users more often incorporate emblematic symbols of good and bad using Western cultural references in the construction of the collective self. The Russian social media rely more on references to the popular cultural of the Soviet era or use Western samples as a neutral base for their remixes. The main rhetoric device in Russian social media involves linking Nazism, the symbolic embodiment of absolute evil, to the image of the Ukrainian army and Ukrainian civilians in general. This type of framing of the war helps to simplify the conflict and make it more understandable or clear.

The Russian visual discourse is also characterized by a homogenized approach to constructing visual narratives, which is likely due to the strong control of state authorities, who may filter and delete information that deviates from officially approved narratives. On Russian social media,

the memes distort the reality, generating alternative interpretations of war events and propagating the narratives of the official state propaganda. Meanwhile, on Ukrainian social media, sharing war-related memes also has a certain therapeutic effect, as it enables remediation and normalization of life during wartime.

ENDNOTES

1 The links to the analyzed groups are provided at the end of the paper.

2 The pigfish meme was initially created by the American internet user @BryceGruber in 2013.

3 North Atlantic Fella Organization, more information can be found here <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NAFO> (group).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alina Mozolevska is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philology, Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University (Mykolaiv, Ukraine). She holds a PhD in Linguistics with a major in Romance Languages from Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv, Ukraine (2015). Her research interests include media studies, discourse analysis, and border studies, and she has published on borders and identity in literary and political discourses. Mozolevska was a visiting professor at the UniGR-Center for Border Studies, Saarland University (the Volkswagen Foundation project "Borders in Crisis", Saarbrücken, Germany). Currently she is a ZOiS UNET Ukraine-based Fellow 2023–2024 and an affilated member of HEPP (University of Helsinki, Finland).

Ukrainian Wartime Posters as a Tool of Participatory Propaganda During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

ELŻBIETA OLZACKA	Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland
E-MAIL	elzbieta.olzacka@uj.edu.pl
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8025-9199

ABSTRACT	Drawing inspiration from the Ukrainian poster boom during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this article explores the role of war-related posters in today's world, where printed media is no longer dominant, and images can travel across different media platforms. The example of wartime Ukraine shows that the poster remains an essential tool of wartime propaganda, promoting patriotic and proactive attitudes and encouraging action to support the war effort, while experiencing substantial changes in its form and means of dissemination. Analyzing various types of grassroots and institutional initiatives related to creating and disseminating war-related posters in Ukrainian offline and online public spaces made it possible to focus on two issues: firstly, how online media facilitate the creation and distribution of posters in offline formats and allow them to transcend the traditional printed form; and secondly, how posters become a convenient tool of participatory propaganda, involving various state and non-state actors in their production and dissemination.

KEYWORDS	poster, participatory propaganda, wartime propaganda, Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian poster, convergence culture
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INTRODUCTION

When on February 24, 2022, after eight years of hostile hybrid operations, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the public space of many cities and towns – not only in Ukraine but also in countries throughout Europe and the world – was filled with visual signals and symbols of support for the Ukrainian resistance. Blue and yellow flags adorned numerous locations, famous buildings were illuminated with these colors, and murals referring to Russian aggression, the refugee crisis, and the heroism of Ukrainians appeared on the streets. The war also sparked a genuine revival of poster art. Many war-related posters were prominently displayed on the streets of Ukrainian cities, at domestic and international exhibitions, and on banners during demonstrations worldwide to boost the fighting spirit, foster patriotism, and promote social unity.

Drawing inspiration from the Ukrainian poster boom, this article explores the role of war-related posters in today's world, where printed media is no longer dominant, and images can travel across different media platforms (JENKINS 2006; CF. FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2014; JARECKA 2014). Using Ukrainian posters from the period of the Russian aggression as an example, I intend to show how posters continue to serve as a significant propaganda tool during times of war while experiencing substantial changes in their form and means of dissemination.

A poster typically depicts a single-sided, large-scale printed artwork combining textual and graphic components (BOICHUK 2013; KRASIŃSKA 2016). Being a form of graphic art designed for a mass audience, it combines a visual appeal capable of capturing the viewer's attention even from afar, with a straightforward simplicity of content. Traditionally, posters were designed to inform, educate, advertise, or convey ideas by displaying them in public places on a vertical surface, typically a wall (AULICH 2007). While the poster's origins as a means of communication may be traced back to the 17th century, it was not until the transition from the 19th to the 20th century that we witnessed a remarkable increase in the production of posters (FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2011). During the early 20th century, when access to radio and television was primarily restricted to individuals of specific socioeconomic backgrounds, posters emerged as a popular form of mass communication between the government and society. This was

facilitated by advancements in color printing methods, which made poster production more efficient and cost-effective (PETRONE 2008; FOX 2009; SZURMIŃSKI ET AL. 2022; NGUYEN 2023).

Since World War I, inexpensive, colorful, and quickly mass-produced posters have also become indispensable for war propaganda (FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2011). Numerous studies (E.G., AULICH 2007; GREEN 2014, 2015; RYAN 2012; TOON 2022) demonstrate that during the World Wars of the 20th century, posters became "real war ammunition," informing, mobilizing, and legitimizing the armed conflict. Posters were utilized to encourage individuals to enlist in the army, contribute to the war effort, or work for the domestic arms industry. Visual means and short slogans also identified enemies and aroused strong negative emotions toward them. Wartime posters were a key *"morale builder"* (TOON 2022: 79), raising the fighting spirit among soldiers on the battlefield and civilians on the home front.

However, in the second half of the 20th century, the gradual spread of new media, led by cinema and television, strongly influenced the form and content of war propaganda (HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2015; JARECKA 2008). The emergence of new communication technologies associated with the advancement of Web 2.0 contributed to a further decline in the importance of print media as instruments for shaping public consciousness in times of war. According to scholars, today's wars are accompanied by an explosion of information produced by state and non-state institutional actors, journalists, conflict participants, and witnesses (HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2015; PATRIKARAKOS 2017; MERRIN 2018; BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022). Both state and non-state actors use digital technologies to inform, legitimize, and mobilize in war conditions, blurring the boundaries between military and civilian actors, and physical and virtual battlefronts (BOICHAK 2021).

In today's world, which is predominantly influenced by digital media, the poster may appear to be an antiquated form of mass communication. Nevertheless, the cases of political protests in Russia, Syria, and Iran have demonstrated that posters continue to serve as a means of widely spreading information and rallying people during revolutions and conflicts (ASMOLOV 2012; HALL 2019; GORNY 2022; CF. FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2014). Unfortunately, while researchers have carefully scrutinized the significance of memes in digitally driven "participatory propaganda" (ASMOLOV 2019; CF.

MUNK 2023; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023), the utilization of posters in contemporary war is less recognized.

Despite the rich literature on the aesthetics, role, and purpose of wartime propaganda posters, the majority of these studies focus on the two major world wars (E.G., GREEN 2014, 2015; HARDIE AND SABIN 2016; RYAN 2012; TOON 2022) and hardly extend beyond this particular historical context (E.G., FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2014; YAOCHANG 2014; NGUYEN 2023; KALKINA 2020; SZURMIŃSKI ET AL. 2022). Furthermore, the dynamically developing studies on war propaganda and visual war imagery shared via social media (E.G., MAKHORTYKH – SYDOROVA 2017; KHATIB 2012; ASMOLOV 2019; SEO 2014) only consider the poster to a small extent as a vital and effective tool for influencing society during contemporary war. Therefore, in the first part of the article, I analyze the changing role of posters in contemporary, digitally mediated wars within the framework of participatory propaganda.

Subsequently, I focus on empirical material describing the poster boom in Ukraine that has been ongoing since the autumn of 2013 and which experienced a further resurgence following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Today's wartime Ukraine is an interesting case for expanding and reconceptualizing the relationship between posters and war propaganda. Current research on Ukrainian posters, however, primarily focuses on revolutionary and Soviet posters, looking for connections with national aesthetics and Ukrainian identity (DONETS 2012; VELYCHENKO 2019; PRYSHCHENKO 2021; ZALEVSKAYA 2018; SOSNYTSKYI 2022). The surge in "patriotic posters," which began after the Revolution of Dignity in 2013/2014 and the onset of the Russian aggression, has not yet been thoroughly analyzed (PORFIMOVYCH 2014).

Consequently, in the second part of the article, I examine the role of war-related posters in the Ukrainian public sphere, which encompasses their presence in both conventional print and digital formats. I demonstrate two main points by analyzing material from Ukrainian online media, online platforms, and social networking sites related to creating and disseminating posters, and obtained through field research conducted between 2017 and 2019. Firstly, I show how online media facilitate the creation and distribution of war-related posters in offline formats and allow them to transcend the traditional printed form. Secondly, I explore how different

actors involved in the Russian-Ukrainian war utilize posters. Hence, my analysis focuses on decentralized online and offline grassroots efforts instigated by artists and activists who employ posters for political objectives, alongside the competitions, exhibitions, and online platforms which are influenced by organizations and state institutions.

POSTERS AND WAR PROPAGANDA IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

In the 20th century – the century of mass and total war – propaganda also became massive, and was designed to reach as much of the population as possible and convince it to be utterly loyal to the state. During World War I posters widely distributed in public spaces, became the primary tool for influencing mass audiences (GREEN 2014; HARDIE – SABIN 2016; TOON 2022; JARECKA 2008: 75). As Tomasz Ferenc, Waldemar Dymarczyk, and Piotr Chomczyński (2011: 12) noted, in the 20th century, *"The poster became part of a directed relationship between the state and the citizen, instilling in the latter a specific vision of the world promoted by the state."* The poster's format, predominantly composed of visuals, facilitated the creation of a clear and direct message that could be decoded by virtually anyone, regardless of their level of education (AULICH 2007). The combination of simple graphics using commonly known cultural codes, vibrant colors, large fonts, and strong slogans made the poster a compelling visual medium capable of evoking viewers' emotions and shaping their attitudes (NGUYEN 2023; AULICH – HEWITT 2007).

The poster's egalitarianism, which allowed it to be received by a mass audience, was reinforced by its display and distribution methods. As Peter Kenez (1985: 112) noted in his work on Soviet forms of mass mobilization, posters were inexpensive to produce in many identical copies and could be conveniently transported and widely disseminated. *"Once the poster was affixed to a wall in a suitable location, it could be viewed by many people many times, reinforcing the message,"* Karen Fox (2009: 77) added. While posters could be displayed in galleries and museums, which also applied to propaganda posters created during times of war (E.G., TOON 2022; JARECKA 2008: 75), their primary purpose was to be placed in public spaces accessible to the general population, such as streets, shops, workplaces, and educational institutions. As a result, the individuals did not have to incur any expenses related to the consumption of the poster, such as the cost of purchasing a magazine or newspaper or an exhibition ticket (FERENC – DYMARCZYK – CHOMCZYŃSKI 2011: 12).

Furthermore, the influence of posters displayed in public spaces was frequently unintentional and involuntary, as the visual content can be apprehended even by individuals who quickly pass by without consciously interpreting it (FOX 2009: 77). Therefore, posters could be *"seen by everyone and understood by all. [...] They could be placed anywhere with ease, and their ubiquity offered huge potential for public consumption regardless of literacy"* (TOON 2022: 79).

In contrast to the wars of the 20th century, where *"governments and the military were able to control the flow of information around their operations,"* including the manipulation of propaganda, contemporary conflicts exhibit a more decentralized and participatory nature (BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022: 1; CF. MERRIN 2018; HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2015). The actual game changer was the emergence of new information and communication technologies, including smartphones for the general public that allow anyone to view, communicate, and interpret the war in real time, and social networking sites, where there is a constant, decentralized, and chaotic flow of information, comments, images, sounds, and videos related to the war. This has resulted in the erosion of states' information monopoly and their ability to control the dissemination of news (MERRIN 2018; BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022).[1]

At the same time, the wide range of actors that participate in the war is connected in a new, immediate way through online media (BOICHAK – HOSKINS 2022: 2; PÖTZSCH 2015; MERRIN 2018; PATRIKAROS 2017; ASMOLOV 2022). They produce posts reporting, commenting on, or interpreting war activities, create and share memes, graphics, photos, or videos, post data on special maps or platforms prepared by state and non-state institutions, and pay money to various causes through crowdfunding platforms. When observing recent activities around Russia's aggression against Ukraine, it should be noted that the extraordinary number of types of these crowdfunding activities – from large campaigns, coordinated by the state and supported by public figures, to small actions among friends, from collecting money for ammunition, drones, or bulletproof vests to supporting wounded children, scholarships for artists and scientists, and even animals evacuated from a war zone – makes it possible for users to decide for themselves how their money will be spent. Although these actions do not require someone to leave their couch, they can have a tangible impact on the outcome of the war. Because of this, when describing the contemporary "radical war,"

Ford and Hoskins (2022) write about "intimate connections" between life at home and in places of violent conflict.

In this new reality, propaganda has also undergone a profound transformation, becoming participatory, decentralized, and deinstitutionalized. Developing the concept of "participatory propaganda," Gregory Asmolov (2019) draws attention to a kind of intimacy in propaganda related to blurring the line between private and public when using online media. The researcher noted that *"propaganda infiltrates our most intimate spaces, where users interact with their laptops and mobile devices. The location of technological interaction is not simply the household, but the bed or sofa – spaces commonly associated with relaxation and entertainment. Propaganda moves from the living room to the bedroom, follows people as they travel to work on crowded public transport, and remains with them in office time. We can wake up and fall asleep with propaganda in our hands. It finds us at the university, in the bathroom, or on the beach"* (IBID.: 7).

In addition, the consumption of propaganda content is today closely connected with social interaction when we share a post, image, video, or meme found on the Internet with our friends. The participatory and socializing nature of propaganda is clearly expressed when *"ordinary people experience propaganda posts as something shared by their own trusted friends, perhaps with comments or angry reactions, shaping their own opinions and assumptions"* (HAIGH – KOZAK 2017: 2080). Therefore, *"in online environments, the consumption of propaganda is deeply embedded in the structure of social relations, which allows the propaganda to further infiltrate our everyday lives"* (ASMOLOV 2019: 8).

New communication and information technologies also enable the immediate spread of propaganda and encourage viewers to take actions directly proposed by the propaganda (IBID.). This may include public acts of support for a cause (for example, signing an open letter), donating money to a cause indicated by the creator of the propaganda message, or taking part in some indicated initiative. Furthermore, *"propaganda distribution, consumption, and participation often share the same platform and are mediated by the same digital devices (such as mobile phones or laptops)"* (IBID.). This means that by scrolling our Facebook wall, between watching an ad for new shoes and "liking" a photo of our friend's child, we can click on the

link posted by our boss and support the purchase of a new ambulance for Ukrainian volunteers. We then become part of the "sofa troops," to use a term coined by Alexander Shalitov (CITED IN ASMOLOV 2021), who take part in a conflict without leaving their own sofas.

As researchers note, a convenient tool for participatory online propaganda is a meme, which is both an element of digital participatory culture and a part of an organized activity aimed at controlling the narrative around warfare (CF. MUNK 2023; HORBYK – ORLOVA 2023; KREPS – LUSHENKO – CARTER 2023). A digitally generated poster, akin to a meme, could also function as a convenient tool for engaging in participatory propaganda, as I will show with the example of Ukrainian wartime posters.

Computer graphics, the primary method for producing posters in recent times, impacts the development of novel formal solutions, the evolving aesthetics of poster art, and the methods of distributing and utilizing posters (CF. JARECKA 2014; ZALEVSKAYA 2018). Due to new information and communication technologies, it is now possible to design and replicate a poster in an extremely short time and in unlimited copies. In addition, in contrast to earlier periods, the contemporary war-related poster is now visible not only in physical form, in which it is displayed on poles, walls, bus stops, and billboards, and carried as a banner during demonstrations and marches, but also in virtual spaces. Posters disseminated digitally via diverse online platforms and social networking sites have the potential to reach a wide audience irrespective of geographical location, and effectively raise social consciousness. Two smartphones with Internet access are enough to connect an artist creating content in a bombarded city with a viewer who can consume wartime art from their own safe sofa (CF. ASMOLOV 2021).

However, in contrast to the meme, the poster has continued to operate in its original physical form since its inception. In addition, within the context of convergence culture (JENKINS 2006), the same poster can circulate among different media platforms, sometimes experiencing modifications and remixes initiated by individual users (CF. FERENC 2014; KALKINA 2020). In contrast to the original, producing these remixes does not necessitate artistic ability. The online poster can be conveniently printed and exhibited at many locations as well as replicated in leaflets, stickers, banners and murals, or even printed on garments (CF. JARECKA 2014: 177). As I will show, online

media greatly enhances the distribution of posters in offline formats, including both traditional forms, such as large-format prints, and non-traditional and innovative forms. Consequently, the online poster, more so than its printed counterpart, becomes a component of both participatory culture (CF. KALKINA 2020) and participatory propaganda.

Furthermore, posters, being a form of popular art, continue to serve as a commodity purchased for decorative purposes. Thus, wartime posters, especially those created by renowned artists, can easily become a war crowdfunding tool facilitating the gathering funds for war purposes. This is achieved through special on-site exhibitions, during which everyone can buy a copy of the poster, thus supporting the war effort. Such exhibitions may be organized both in the country where hostilities are ongoing and abroad. In addition, online platforms greatly facilitate the sale of posters. Many of these platforms, as shown by the current situation in Ukraine, serve to present art, inform about war activities, and sell posters to collect money for the struggle. Purchasers can either be satisfied with their digital form or print the poster themselves and utilize it according to their preference.

These aims may pertain to interior decoration as well as the expression of political opinions in public spaces. It should be noted that online posters distributed through private channels on social networking sites and through personal interactions, are not subject to the control of state and military institutions, at least in countries lacking centralized Internet control (CF. HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2015). As a result, posters can now play a role not only in institutionalized political campaigns organized by government and military institutions, but also in the independent activities of various groups and people.

Recent observations in various global locations have revealed that online platforms not only facilitate the organization and mobilization of participants in political protests, but also play a role in the distribution of visual propaganda through both online and offline means (E.G., ASMOLOV 2012; KHATIB 2012; ONUCH 2015; GORNY 2022). Digital media, as noted by Olga Onuch (2015), have resulted in the emergence of a new type of protester who uses them to become organized faster and more effectively and expand the repertoire of collective action. One eagerly undertaken activity is the production and sharing of visual material to inform and mobilize the public. For example,

during the 2011–2012 election-related protests in Russia, specific internet platforms were established to simplify the production and dissemination of political posters and leaflets (ASMOLOV 2012). As a result, every participant in the protest could design and produce their own poster, which they could then carry to the demonstration.

Simultaneously, while states lack the ability to exert direct control over the distribution of content through social networking platforms, they actively seek to shape the public perception of war and rally societal support for military operations. As highlighted by Olga Boichak and Andrew Hoskins (2022: 1), the new information environment of war is *"difficult to control, but easy to weaponize."* States, through their military and cultural institutions, can provide online platforms that enable the integration of various dispersed initiatives and guide users toward specific objectives (ASMOLOV 2022). This is also applicable to war art and propaganda, which loses its scattered nature due to its concentration on platforms and becomes "arrested" by state institutions (CF. HOSKINS – O'LOUGHLIN 2015).

WARTIME POSTERS IN UKRAINIAN PUBLIC SPACES

Revolution and War: the Birth of the Ukrainian Patriotic Poster

In the autumn of 2013, during the Revolution of Dignity, a surge in artistic expression led to a real poster boom (CF. PESENTI 2020). As a result of the involvement of artists associated with the Kyiv art gallery and club *"Mystets'kyy Barbakan,"* an art barricade was created in Kyiv's Independence Square (MARAKYN 2015; SERHATSKOVA 2014). The works of renowned Ukrainian artists, such as Oleksa Mann, Andriy Yermolenko, and Ivan Semesiuk, including posters, were exhibited there. Posters were additionally used during protests, where they were replicated in several copies and carried by protesters in the form of banners or affixed to walls and poles.

The online media facilitated the widespread distribution of these posters, thus amplifying their influence. An important "Maidan" initiative was StrikePoster (*StraĭkPoster*), an online group formed to create and share posters to be used during the protests. As one of the initiators of the initiative explained the significance of the poster in fostering protests and

mobilizing society: *"Today, in times of crisis, the poster has become an indispensable tool for many people to express their positions and views. Not everyone speaks from the stage, but everyone can bring a simple, concise poster that reflects emotions"* (DESIATERYK 2014). Strike Poster engaged both artists – in creating new works – and ordinary users – in modifying and using them. As the initiators wrote on the initiative's Facebook page: *"We are convinced that the fate of the country is being decided today. We encourage all creative people to join the nationwide strike and make posters or any other materials. We have created a resource where artists, illustrators, and designers can post their works, and anyone can download them to print or put on their pages on social networks"* (UKRAÏNS'KA PRAVDA 2013). Moreover, protesters could download poster templates from the project's website and customize the text so that it would reflect their thoughts and emotions.

Hence, the initiative allowed poster creators and their viewers to participate in the revolution by creating, sharing, and using posters in physical and virtual spaces. The most widely recognized poster produced by StrikePoster featured a yellow drop against a blue background accompanied by the slogan *"Ia kraplia v okeani"* (I am a drop in the ocean). This poster was frequently utilized during protests in many Ukrainian cities (Picture 1).

PICTURE 1: THE MOST FAMOUS POSTER OF THE STRIKEPOSTER INITIATIVE, "I AM A DROP IN THE OCEAN," DURING THE EUROMAIDAN PROTESTS, FEBRUARY 2, 2014

Source: Strike Poster.

Another initiative facilitated on a grand scale by online media, was establishing a digital collection of amateur and professional posters regarding the Revolution of Dignity. This task was undertaken by the Poster Museum, founded in 2011 by Viktor Tryhub in the open space of the "Battle

of Kyiv 1943" museum, and initially focused on posters from the "totalitarian period" (Poster Museum n/a). In December 2013, the museum launched a Facebook page and began sharing patriotic posters online.[2] The extensive collection of posters was also utilized offline, not only in Ukraine but also during demonstrations organized by the Ukrainian diaspora in numerous global locations.

In March 2014, one of the initiators of StrikePoster predicted that as *"demand for the poster skyrocketed with the beginning of the revolution, it will fall just as sharply after the final victory"* (DESIATERYK 2014). However, despite this prediction, the significance of the posters continued during the onset of the war against Russia and the Russian-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country. Russia's actions had a hybrid character, as the Russians skillfully used their cultural and media industries to conduct disinformation campaigns and shape local and international public opinion (KUZIO 2020). Thus, to successfully resist Russia's hybrid attacks, the Ukrainians created a networked "information and cultural front," in which art also played a significant part (PESENTI 2020; OLZACKA 2023). One of the most recognizable Ukrainian poster artists, Andriy Yermolenko, stated in 2015: *"There was practically no such Ukrainian content before. Nevertheless, in the last two years, the Internet has exploded with patriotic posters and symbols. We realized that we had lost and were losing the information war. And posters are weapons that help us fight"* (FIALKO 2015).

The StrikePoster initiative continued its online activities by displaying posters regarding military operations in Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, and the downing of the Malaysian Airlines aircraft MH17, which occurred in July 2014 and was caused by pro-Russian separatists. Also, the Poster Museum furthered its endeavors by establishing a website and progressively expanding its collection of posters. These posters increasingly came to be called "patriotic." Their recurring topics revolved around the "anti-terrorist operation" against the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, Russian aggression and the Russian occupation of Crimea. They also discussed the increasing national consciousness among Ukrainians, referencing the Ukrainian language and military customs, particularly those of the Cossacks. Additionally, they invoked significant figures from Ukrainian history and culture, including the 20th-century Ukrainian liberation movement.

Patriotic poster competitions and associated stationary exhibitions gained popularity in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity. In 2014, soon after the transfer of power in Ukraine, the M17 Contemporary Art Center, an independent, non-governmental cultural institution, organized the inaugural "International Competition of Ukrainian Patriotic Posters (Uncensored!)" – a first in the country's history. The competition was co-organized by the informal grassroots art platform "Ukrainian Cultural Front" (*Ukraïns'kyĭ kul'turnyĭ front*), founded during the Euromaidan by the well-known Ukrainian artist and cultural animator Antin Mukharsky. The final exhibition of the competition featured one hundred winning posters created by sixteen authors. Notably, as a result of the limited availability and subpar quality of Ukrainian works, about half of the posters were created by the Russian artist Anton Myrzin, who used the pseudonym Paperdaemon to avoid potential repercussions from the Russian judiciary.[3]

The co-curator of the exhibition, Yelyzaveta Bielska, emphasized that *"in Soviet times, posters were a widespread thing. Now this art is fading away, although it is mass art that is available to everyone. It is important to revive the Ukrainian poster."* The other curator, Antin Mukharsky, spoke in a similar tone: *"I used to serve in the Soviet army. In 'Lenin's' rooms, there were always posters with portraits of strong warriors. We, weak soldiers, associated ourselves with them, increasing morale. So, the poster must encourage and serve as a decoration"* (PROKOPENKO 2014). Therefore, as announced by the event organizers, the winning posters, whose central motif was the Ukrainian warrior, were intended to be printed in many copies and sent to the front line so that they would reach *"every Ukrainian tank"* (IBID.).

The competition's next edition, held in 2015, was much more diverse and attracted more artists interested in creating political posters, including well-known Ukrainian artists such as Andriy Yermolenko, Mykola Honcharov, Ivan Semesiuk, Sviatoslav Pashchuk, and Dmytro Kryshovs'kyi. According to Bielska, this fact demonstrated the resurgence of poster art in Ukraine (FIALKO 2015). In 2015, poster creators could choose from six topics: "Support for the Ukrainian Army," "Freedom for political prisoners," "One indivisible, independent Ukraine," "New Ukrainian heroism," "Our mother tongue," and "Prayer for Ukraine." According to the organizers, posters focusing on these subjects, particularly when exhibited where conflicts occur, can bolster the army's morale and evoke patriotic sentiments

among the general public (IBID.). Furthermore, in both 2014 and 2015, the final exhibition was accompanied by a charity auction, with the proceeds from the poster sales being designated for the medical care of Ukrainian soldiers residing in the Main Military Clinical Hospital in Kyiv.

Furthermore, the newly established government promptly recognized the immense potential of the poster as a means to mobilize individuals for combat. In May 2015, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine initiated the "Ukrainian Patriotic Poster 2015" competition, replicating the title and subject matter of the competition established in 2014 by independent activists. The competition, as stated in the regulation signed by Minister of Culture Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, was aimed to *"shape the national awareness of Ukrainians and an active patriotic society through visual art, drawing public attention to the history of Ukraine and the feat of the Ukrainian warrior-defender; raising the young generation in the steadfast spirit of freedom, honor, and dignity; supporting military personnel ensuring the protection and restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity; and supporting the voluntary movement."* [4] In contrast to the competition organized by the M17 Contemporary Art Center and the Ukrainian Cultural Front, the ministerial competition welcomed submissions from both professional artists and amateurs, including individuals who participated in military operations in Donbas and activists from territories where separatists established "independent" people's republics.

The competition organizer underlined that the winning works would be utilized in printed format for educational institutions, state and public institutions, and military units. Additionally, they would be displayed as large-format advertisements, banners, and billboards in places of mass residence of citizens. In 2016, on Ukraine's 25th anniversary of independence, the Ministry of Culture donated three thousand posters based on the winning works to the Donbas Reconstruction and Development Agency. These posters were intended to be distributed in the frontier territories (URIADOVYĬ PORTAL 2016).

In subsequent years, state and military institutions also arranged amateur competitions for "patriotic posters," which became a crucial component of society's patriotic education, encompassing children and youth. The purpose of these competitions was to instill in the younger generation a strong sense of patriotism, loyalty, love for their country, concern for the

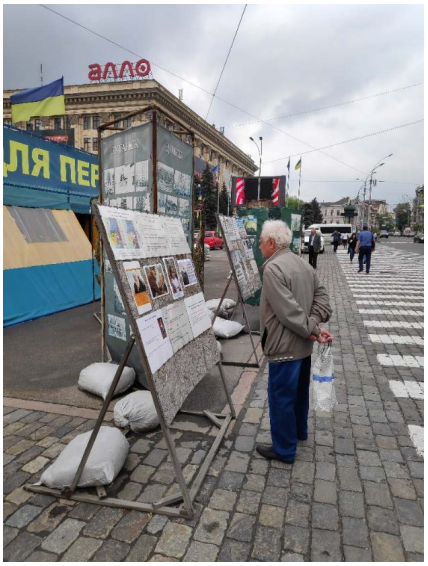
welfare of their nation, and willingness to fulfill their civic and constitutional obligation to safeguard Ukraine's national interests, integrity, and independence (LELYK 2017). For example, in March 2016, the Lviv Military Academy announced a patriotic poster competition titled "Our Destiny Is to Defend Ukraine!" The purpose of the competition was *"the patriotic education of cadets, gaining experience in using visual propaganda tools in working with personnel, improving skills and abilities to create propaganda tools, and finding non-traditional and creative forms of training military personnel."* Three poster themes were recommended: "Ukraine is our homeland," "Without faith, there is no victory," and "The Cossack spirit in all of us" (DAILYLVIV 2016). In turn, as part of the celebration of Constitution Day in 2019, the poster competition "I am Ukraine!" for children and youth was organized by the command of the Infantry Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine together with the volunteer movement "Batalĭon Sitka", with the support of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, and the State Youth Library of Ukraine (MINISTERSTVO MOLODI TA SPORT UKRAĬNY 2019).

Exhibitions of contemporary patriotic posters have also been organized since 2014 by the Poster Museum. Yuri Neroslik, the museum's artistic director and primary creator, volunteered for the Ukrainian Armed Forces at the onset of the conflict. Throughout his time at the front, he actively engaged in combat operations and orchestrated poster exhibits directly "on the front line." These unique exhibitions were arranged under rudimentary circumstances within combat units. They were also organized in local museums in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, with the assistance of the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Donetsk State Administration. The Poster Museum referred to itself as the "Wandering Front Poster Museum" (*Mandrivnyĭ frontovyĭ Muzeĭ plakatu Ukraïny*) from 2014 to 2016 to highlight the nature of its activities.

Furthermore, alongside these extensive endeavors undertaken by non-governmental organizations and governmental institutions, posters were frequently employed in smaller-scale local campaigns. Following the Maidan revolution, many Ukrainian cities designated specific locations, adorned them with street plaques to honor "new heroes" and exhibited political posters and cartoons at these locations (Picture 2). These were local and grassroots initiatives, possible mainly due to the accessibility of

online media, which allows anybody to print a poster or graphic from the Internet using a personal printer and display it in the city's public spaces.

PICTURE 2: THE CENTER OF KHARKIV, WHERE THE "EVERYTHING FOR VICTORY" TENT HAS BEEN STANDING SINCE 2014 AND WHERE VARIOUS KINDS OF PATRIOTIC CONTENT ARE PRESENTED, MAY 2019. FROM FEBRUARY 2022, IT IS ALSO A PLACE WHERE WAR-RELATED POSTERS ARE EXHIBITED



Source: Author.

Online media also facilitated the use of the poster as a mass medium that would not let Ukrainian society forget that the country was still at war. Posters were an essential tool in online campaigns to support the starving political prisoner Oleh Sentsov (#SaveOlehSentsov) and other individuals imprisoned by the Kremlin (e.g., #LiberateCrimea). The posters were shared on the poster artists' social media profiles, accompanied by a relevant campaign hashtag, and disseminated digitally by organizations and individual users.[5] Furthermore, they were also employed in printed format during public demonstrations (PAVLOVA – SHAKYROV – MAETNAIA 2018).

One of the most recognizable Ukrainian poster artists, Andriy Yermolenko, also initiated an individual action during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Uncompromising posters depicting Russia as a violent and ruthless aggressor kicking a ball crafted from a human skull, highlighted the ethical dilemma of attending football matches hosted in the territory of the aggressor state. Initially shared on his Facebook profile,

the artist's posters were disseminated digitally by individual users. In addition, activists in Ukrainian cities printed and displayed them (Picture 3), while they were also utilized during demonstrations held in front of the Russian embassy in Kyiv (KYSELEVSKAIA 2018; VANNEK 2018).

PICTURE 3: ANTI-RUSSIAN POSTERS BY ANDRIY YERMOLENKO, KYIV'S INDEPENDENCE SQUARE, JUNE 2018

Source: Author.

In addition, a digitally created poster is no longer limited to its printed version and can be displayed through other media. An interesting example of this phenomenon is Nikita Titov's poster "Frontline," which was made and shared on the artist's Facebook page on March 19, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic (Picture 4). The poster, referring to the analogy between war and a pandemic, shows a face divided in half – one half is a soldier's face, and the other is a doctor's face. This work gained popularity and was shown in printed form at many individual and collective exhibitions. Furthermore, a commemorative coin based on this poster was coined by the Bank of Ukraine (Picture 6), and a stamp based on it was issued by the Ukrainian Post (Picture 5).

PICTURE 4: POSTER "FRONTLINE" BY NIKITA TITOV, POSTED ON HIS FACEBOOK PROFILE

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3031398500260617&set=pb.100001714917168.-2207520000&type=3>.

PICTURE 5: THE "FRONTLINE" POSTAGE STAMP INTRODUCED INTO CIRCULATION IN MAY 2020 BY THE NATIONAL POSTAL OPERATOR UKRPOSHTA

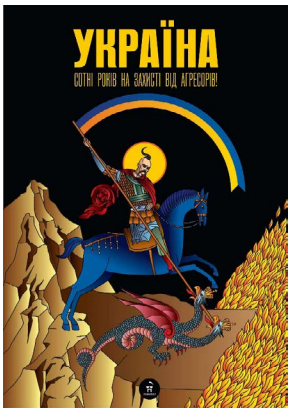
Source: <https://www.057.ua/news/2907844/peredovaa-plakat-harkovskogo-hudoznika-titova-nacbank-otcekanil-na-pamatnoj-monete-foto>.

PICTURE 6: REVERSE OF THE "FRONTLINE" COIN RELEASED BY THE NATIONAL BANK OF UKRAINE IN OCTOBER 2020

Source: <https://psm7.com/ru/money/zavershilsya-pervyj-etap-konkursa-na-luchshuyu-monetu-v-ukraine-kakie-monety-proxodyat-dalshe.html>.

Another interesting example of the convergence of online and offline media is Yermolenko's poster "Hundreds of Years of Defense from Aggressors," created on the occasion of Ukraine's Independence Day and dedicated to the Security Service of Ukraine. The author initially shared the poster on his Facebook profile on August 24, 2018 (Picture 7). Subsequently, several Ukrainian cities in western Ukraine utilized this poster in the form of billboards and commercials for the Defender of Ukraine Day campaign (Picture 8) (BUKNEWS 2018). Furthermore, Andriy Garin was commissioned by the Security Service of Ukraine to transform the poster into a short animated video, which was shared on the institution's social media platforms.[6]

PICTURE 7: THE POSTER "HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF DEFENSE FROM AGGRESSORS" BY ANDRIY YERMOLENKO, POSTED ON HIS FACEBOOK PROFILE



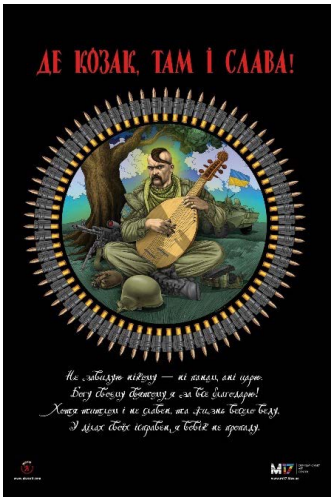
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/andrey.ermolenko/posts/2265081266838930?ref=embed_post>.

PICTURE 8: THE POSTER "HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF DEFENSE FROM AGGRESSORS" IN THE FORM OF AN ADVERTISEMENT ON THE STREETS OF IVANO-FRANKIVSK, OCTOBER 2018

Source: Author.

Another Yermolenko poster titled "Wherever the Cossack Stands, There Is Glory!" (Picture 9), which won third prize in the patriotic poster competition organized by the M17 Contemporary Art Center, was reproduced by an anonymous author on a mural in the center of Lviv next to a quote from a poem by the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko (Picture 10).

PICTURE 9: THE POSTER "WHEREVER THE COSSACK STANDS, THERE IS GLORY!" BY ANDRIY YERMOLENKO



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=992989854091944&set=pcb.992990227425240>.

PICTURE 10: THE IMAGE OF THE COSSACK MAMAI FROM YERMOLENKO'S POSTER ON THE LVIV MURAL, OCTOBER 2018

Source: Author.

Russian Aggresion Against Ukraine: Posters at War

The February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine catalyzed the intensification of Ukrainian war-related art. Since the onset of the invasion, the artists promptly responded by producing posters, graphics, pictures, and paintings that reflected their sense of threat, anger, despair, and hope. The Russian aggression has mobilized Ukrainian artists to create art with a simple message and a clear goal: to oppose the Russian aggression and mobilize Ukrainians and the global community to resist and struggle against it. Consequently, the poster has emerged as a clear preference for numerous artists, including those who previously engaged in different art forms. Oleksii Sai, a conceptual artist and an author of multimedia projects who ultimately refocused on the war after February 24, expressed this spirit: *"Now I do something akin to propaganda: posters, banners, and such. I try to work as much as I can to be helpful to everyone here and now and donate many of my works to various auctions to support Ukraine"* (CHERNYCHKO 2022).

The public can see the war-related artworks of Ukrainian artists in the public spaces of many Ukrainian cities. They are showcased on billboards, in street advertising displays, and in the windows of residences, stores, or institutions (ROCHOWICZ 2022). Furthermore, alongside these dispersed and independent efforts, special exhibitions of war posters are organized. In May 2022, in "semi-empty" Kyiv, employees of the Ukrainian House hung nine large-format war-related posters on the facade of the building (Picture 11). These works, often shocking in their expressiveness and content, were exhibited to *"inspire and support Kyivans who are still in the capital or have just returned home"* (KATAIEVA 2022). In July, this exhibition,

supplemented with further works, moved to the interior of the Ukrainian House, presenting more than a hundred posters by 38 artists. As the exhibition organizers emphasized, posters *"became the voices of resistance" and "one of the forms of dialogue within Ukrainian society"* (DEN' 2022). *"Through the poster, the artists managed to express the complex range of emotions and the horror of the events that all Ukrainians are experiencing and going through today,"* explained the project curator, Alisa Hryshanova, at the opening of the exhibition (IBID.).

PICTURE 11: THE EXHIBITION OF WAR POSTERS ON THE FACADE OF THE UKRAINIAN HOUSE IN THE CENTER OF KYIV

Source: <https://uadim.in.ua/magazine/tpost/a7k8b0g921-ukranskii-dm-vihodit-u-publchnii-prostr>.

Zaporizhzhia became the second center of the Ukrainian wartime poster. In the framework of a joint project of the Department of Culture and Tourism of the City Council and the BIRUCHIY contemporary art project, since June 2022, many well-known Ukrainian artists, such as Andiy Yermolenko, Oleskii Sai, Mykola Honharov, and Nikita Titov, presented their works in special exhibitions in the city center.[7] Exhibitions of wartime posters are also held in other Ukrainian cities. For example, in the project "Ukraine above All!," posters by Ukrainian artists were presented not only in Kyiv, but also in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Khmelnytskyi. Many of these exhibitions are accompanied by meetings with artists, which often have a mobilizing dimension, as well as poster auctions and fundraisers organized to help war-related causes or artists facing challenging conditions during the conflict.

Posters have also become a form of international communication and mobilization of the global community. Ukrainian embassies, consulates, municipal halls, and educational institutions (E.G., UNIWERSYTET WROCŁAWSKI 2023; UKRINFORM 2023) support the organization of Ukrainian wartime poster

exhibitions in various places worldwide. The "BIRUCHIY Contemporary Art Project" contributed to this vibrant and extensive activity. In 2022, in collaboration with the NGO "Contemporary Art Researchers Union," they organized a series of exhibitions titled "Ukrainian Wartime Posters" in various European cities, including Oxford, Oberhausen, and Paris.[8] In addition, they arranged similar exhibitions in the United States, receiving assistance from the Consulate General of Ukraine in New York, the National Center "Ukrainian House," and sponsors. As was highlighted in the exhibition's description, which was crafted by the organizers: *"Meet key Ukrainian contemporary artists and graphic designers who were forced to leave their homes due to military aggression and became temporarily displaced within the country. Most of them still continue to work in Ukraine creating wartime posters in order to fight the propaganda of the aggressor"* (UKRAINIAN WARTIME POSTERS 2022).

Foreign exhibitions have the dual objective of presenting Ukrainian art and artists, and raising awareness about the current brutal war in the country and its repercussions. As Olena Speranska, an exhibition curator, emphasized: *"Our goal is to show the world Ukrainian contemporary art that reflects the brutal events of today: bloody murders, torture, abuse of women, children, and prisoners of war, destruction of Ukrainian cities and genocide of the Ukrainian people"* (IBID.). Exhibition visitors are also encouraged to donate funds to support Ukrainian artists *"who continue to work under attacks against Russian propaganda"* and support destroyed hospitals destroyed by the Russians. Additionally, some of the exhibitions were co-organized by activists of Ukrainian descent, thus becoming a tool for integrating the Ukrainian diaspora and mobilizing the entire local community to support Ukraine's resistance against Russia.

Aside from on-site exhibitions, posters distributed via internet platforms and social networking sites can reach a larger audience and impact social consciousness. Profiles of poster artists on social media can serve as a means of wartime mobilization, enabling them to present their artwork, engage with their audience, express gratitude towards the military, authorities, and specific individuals, and seek financial support. Online viewers emotionally stimulated by the poster can get involved in activities supporting the war effort by donating money to fundraisers proposed by the artist or engaging in volunteer work. Social networking sites also

allow the public to express their reactions to the posters. These reactions can be a comment under the post, "liking," or sharing a poster on someone's profile. By engaging in these online content-related activities, both the creator and the viewers contribute to spreading propaganda without leaving the metaphorical sofa, which represents a secure and private environment (CF. ASMOLOV 2019, 2021; FORD – HOSKINS 2022).

In addition, special Internet platforms provide the widespread distribution of propaganda online, allowing a larger audience to be exposed to the wartime art than in the case of a traditional stationary exhibition. Furthermore, physical constraints are irrelevant in this context. For example, the Poster Museum initiative continues its online activities, collecting and displaying posters via its website and Facebook page. A virtual collection of posters about the Russian aggression against Ukraine is also collected on the online open platform "Creatives for Ukraine," created by Lithuanian creative sector representatives.

The creators of the platform believe that *"creativity is a significant weapon in showing what is happening in the eastern European country"* (CREATIVES FOR UKRAINE 2022). Therefore, they encourage *"the global creative community to share photographs, images, illustrations, and art to give a face to the War in Ukraine."* The portal aims to provide free access to selected graphics depicting the war in Ukraine to media, non-profit organizations, and other foundations, enabling them to showcase these visuals to a broader audience. Through the platform, it is possible, among other things, to download war posters at a higher resolution and *"spread them as widely as possible"* to *"help fight the information war in a practical way"* (COWAN 2022).

Simultaneously, as Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015: 1320) note, state and military institutions try to gain control over the chaotic social media dynamics and use them for their own purposes in the era of "arrested war." One of the strategies the state uses is establishing online platforms, gathering the works of various artists, and disseminating information about various initiatives conducted as part of a decentralized, digitally driven "cultural front" (OLZACKA 2023). Just one day after the Russian invasion, on February 25, 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy launched the bilingual website "Ukraine War Art Collection."[9] At the end of March 2023, the collection included 352 projects of Ukrainian war art, including

artworks by renowned Ukrainian poster artists such as Yerlomenko, Titov, and Honcharov. These posters are organized in chronological order on the respective subpages. In addition, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, a state-owned institution established in 2017, initiated the "Art of Victory" portal during the initial stages of the invasion. This platform showcases a collection of wartime murals, posters, illustrations, caricatures, and memes.[10]

Both sites actively encourage artists to share their work. On the portal "Art of Victory," "anyone can share their art/graphic work in support of the invincible spirit of Ukrainians in the face of russian aggression" (UCF 2022). For both initiatives, special forms are used to upload a file to the server. The viewers are also encouraged to disseminate the posters as widely as possible in the virtual space. According to the appeal drafted by Vladyslav Berkovski, the head of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, *"You may share already published artworks with friends in Ukraine and around the world; use them as images in your posts on social networks, but make sure to mention the authors. Everyone should know and remember the russian invasion of Ukraine, the struggle of Ukrainians against the russian army! And art will help!"* (IBID.). Therefore, the dissemination of wartime art is recognized as helping to fight the information war, and the state, utilizing online platforms monitored by its institutions, seeks to maintain control over this process.

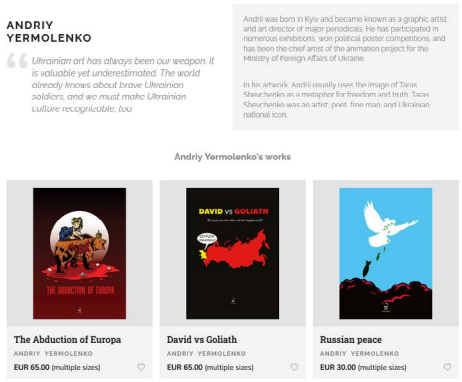
Online platforms can also facilitate war-related fundraising activities (CF. BOICHAK – ASMOLOV 2021). For instance, a dedicated online platform has strengthened the impact of the aforementioned "Ukrainian Wartime Posters" in-site exhibition initiative. This platform enables viewers to both explore the works of Ukrainian poster artists who address the issue of the Russian aggression and purchase a poster to support Ukraine's fight (Picture 12). The purchaser can conveniently select the poster they desire and also select the preferred size for printing and delivery.

PICTURE 12: THE ONLINE PLATFORM "UKRAINIAN WARTIME POSTERS"

Source: <https://www.ukrainianposter.com/shop>.

Another online platform for the dissemination and sale of Ukrainian wartime posters that was established in response to the Russian invasion is "Sunseed ART." This platform was founded by the Ukrainian artists and cultural activists Olesya Drashkaba and Natalia Popovych. As declared, they are dedicated to supporting *"forging rage into art"* and utilizing this war art to achieve victory: *"Every poster is a reminder that in Ukraine people die for precious values, but art makes them immortal and contributes to the emergence of new, even more resilient generations of people of free will"* (SUNSEED ART 2022A). Currently, the platform contains the works of nineteen Ukrainian artists who stayed in Ukraine during wartime. Each has a subpage containing not only the posters by them available for purchase but also a personal profile and a significant quote from them about the present circumstances. For instance, Andriy Yermolenko articulates his viewpoint by stating, *"Ukrainian art has always been our weapon. It is valuable yet underestimated. The world already knows about brave Ukrainian soldiers, and we must make Ukrainian culture recognizable, too"* (SUNSEED ART 2022B), (Picture 13).

PICTURE 13: THE ONLINE PLATFORM "SUNSEED ART"



Source: <http://sunseed-art.com/en/artist/6295c63172ced7045c5ac6d5/andriy-yermolenko>.

The bilingual Sunseed ART platform combines the goals of promoting and supporting Ukrainian art and artists and generating profits. However, as a "socially responsible business," the platform has pledged to contribute 10% of its income to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the "Come Back Alive" fund, or the Charitable Foundation "Voices of Children" until victory day. Furthermore, the platform aims to foster patriotic and anti-colonial sentiments related to the Russian aggression. The platform's developers' words, which are quoted on the website, highlight this ideological agenda. For instance, Kateryna Melnyk, the director and project manager, notes that *"the full-scale invasion started in 2022, but in reality, this war has been going on for centuries, and this fight is above all for Ukrainian culture and identity. It is impossible to overestimate the capacity of Ukrainian artists to resist, both in the past and the present. In spite of what life has delivered to them, they continue to create incredibly valuable cultural output. I am very happy to be a part of a project that will inspire the whole world in a struggle for goodness and which will represent the strength and beauty of Ukrainian art"* (SUNSEED ART 2022C).

Some other examples of hybrid initiatives that merge the commercial sale of posters with the goal of mobilizing buyers to support Ukraine are "ArtDopomoga,"[11] co-organized by the International Book Arsenal Festival (Kyiv) and promoted by the American band Gogol Bordello, and "Artists Against War,"[12] an online store with artworks created by artists from all over the world as a response to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. According to the creators of these platforms, when you buy war-related posters, you not only provide financial assistance to the defenders, but also can participate in disseminating information about the war and expressing solidarity with the fighting country. *"You can use printed posters to show your support by placing them in public spaces,"* as the "Artists Against War" website emphasizes. Thus, the trade in posters transcends consumerism and transforms into a mode of struggle and resistance. Not only the act of creating, but also the selling and purchasing of posters are depicted as a means of combating the aggressor and demonstrating solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance.

Undoubtedly, the digital format of the poster simplifies this process by enabling the sale of the "original layout" itself, rather than solely the physical product that necessitates manufacturing and transportation. The platforms mentioned above provide digital posters for sale, which may be

downloaded and printed by the buyer. The creators of the Sunseed ART platform underline that *"this way the processes will be optimized, and our product will be the most optimal to your needs. You won't have to wait for the delivery and pay an additional fee"* (SUNSEED ART 2022A). Moreover, this method is advantageous for sellers who are now residing in Ukraine and may encounter temporary difficulties in both producing physical copies and delivering them domestically and internationally.

The digital format also facilitates the reproduction of the poster in non-traditional, non-paper forms. For example, Yermolenko and Titov, through their social media profiles, offer for sale clothes decorated with their wartime posters. The profits are to be allocated to war-related charities. Thus, by choosing to buy and wear such clothes, individuals can openly express their ideas through posters on T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, or bags, while supporting the war effort.

PICTURE 14: A T-SHIRT WITH THE POSTER "I BELIEVE IN THE UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES" BY YERMOLENKO. HALF OF THE PROFITS FROM THE SALE WILL BE ALLOCATED TO PAYING FOR THE NEEDS OF THE UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=5926887673991586&set=pb.100000112372547.-2207520000.&type=3>.

PICTURE 15: A T-SHIRT WITH A POSTER BY TITOV, PRODUCED BY BARMASH STUDIO. ALL PROFITS FROM THE SALE WILL BE ALLOCATED TO PAYING FOR THE NEEDS OF THE UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4841934745873641&set=pb.100001714917168.-2207520000&type=3>.

CONCLUSION

In the reality of participatory warfare and culture, where visuality and the fast communication of an emotional message are so important, the poster gains a new life and an even greater ability to influence. The advent of online media did not diminish the significance of posters as a printed medium. Instead, it enhanced the process of creating and distributing posters both through digital channels and in the physical world. As part of a convergence culture in which old and new media collide (JENKINS 2006), the poster can take on new forms, embracing both offline and online public spaces. This article draws attention to how online media facilitate the creation and dissemination of posters in offline forms while enabling them to go beyond the traditional paper form. War-related posters can be reproduced in other media, such as stamps or clothing, which increases their power and range of influence in various private and public contexts. The interpenetration of various forms and content is also visible on the Internet, where posters become a part of the digital participative culture (JENKINS 2006; KALKINA 2020). Online media, for example, facilitates the creation of personalized versions of political posters by enriching the template with someone's own slogan.

Furthermore, thanks to online media, posters can be an element of institutionalized campaigns conducted by state and military institutions, but also a part of the decentralized activities of groups and individuals. This deinstitutionalization of propaganda is visible in the example of Ukraine, where the contemporary political poster was born in social and grassroots revolutionary conditions. With the help of social networking sites and initiatives such as Strike Poster, artists could spread their art and influence events. Also, the viewers were not compelled to remain passive recipients of the poster art but could become active participants by downloading and printing posters, and using them in public spaces. Also, in the conditions of the full-scale Russian invasion, the creation and dissemination of posters in Ukraine have not been subject to state control and censorship, even if state institutions try to create online platforms collecting various scattered initiatives and use them for their own purposes.

The case of wartime Ukraine was also useful for exploring how contemporary war-related posters broaden and alter the boundaries between

online and offline forms of participatory propaganda. In the reality of Web 2.0, anyone can be a "sofa warrior," and disseminating wartime propaganda in the form of a poster becomes a convenient and attractive way of fighting. However, unlike a meme, which functions primarily in the online environment, a poster, even if created online and distributed primarily on the Internet, still retains its potential to perform in physical public spaces.

Wartime posters, especially those created by well-known artists, often evoke aesthetic pleasure in viewers. As a type of mass art, the war poster becomes a commodity, and its sale is often associated with raising funds for war purposes. Thus, looking at them and posting them on social media profiles, or printing them and hanging them in home spaces, can be simultaneously related to entertainment, the need to consume "fashionable" content, and military combat (CF. JARECKA 2014). Additionally, posters that have been replicated on clothes and accessories serve as a tool for the expression of one's political views in public spaces in addition to being a stylish accessory. In this way, the boundary between the public and intimate dimensions of propaganda is blurred, not only in the virtual world (ASMOLOV 2019) but also in the physical world.

Without doubt, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study on the changing role of posters in contemporary, digitally mediated war is preliminary and requires additional investigation in future research. One area that has yet to be considered is the role of wartime posters in diaspora mobilization, which seems to be a promising direction for future studies (CF. CHERNOBROV 2020). Also, the significance of the art industry and artists in fostering participatory propaganda deserves further investigation, as do the connections between posters, memes, internet graphics, and street art in terms of their purpose, form, and content. Finally, expanding the examination of posters as a means of participatory propaganda to different cultural and political contexts is necessary for enhancing our comprehension of contemporary conflicts.

ENDNOTES

1 The article does not refer to the significant changes in war propaganda related to the emergence of radio, cinema, and television. There is an extensive literature on this topic, for example, Short 1983; Robinson 2003; Kellner 2004; and Jarecka 2006.

2 Official "Poster Museum" Facebook profile: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100081286584781>.

3 Indeed, the Russian FSB brought two criminal proceedings against Anton Myrzin (Paperdaemon) for his participation in the exhibition and open support for the new Ukrainian government. As a result, in 2015, the artist left for Ukraine. The Russian media also spoke very negatively about the exhibition, which is why, in 2015, the organizers decided not to invite their representatives to the final exhibition (Fialko 2015).

4 Full text available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0562-15#Text>.

5 For example, posters from the #LiberateCrimea series created by Andriy Yermolenko and posted on his Facebook profile: <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02zn3zYZKSTupu3tAvKeVsGBwyDGjDRN3iq4xmQrjmR2RHjiWHUgPbVbLivqs77Xdel&id=100024825341857>.

6 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUJXKfBwFu4>.

7 The full list of exhibitions: <https://www.biruchiyart.com.ua/news.html>.

8 The full list of exhibitions: <https://www.biruchiyart.com.ua/news.html>.

9 Official project website: <https://war-art.mkip.gov.ua/>.

10 Official project website: <https://milart.ucf.in.ua/>.

11 Official project website: <https://artdopomoga.com/>.

12 Official project website: <https://againswar.gallery>.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Elżbieta Olzacka is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. She has received Master's degrees in Sociology (2007) and Russian Studies (2011) and a PhD in Sociology (2014) from Jagiellonian University. Her interests include theories of war and conflict from sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies perspectives. From 2014 to 2016, she conducted a research project financed by the Polish National Science Center dedicated to the cultural context of the civil war in the Republic of Tajikistan. Her current research includes Ukrainian cultural mobilization and cultural policy in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Discussion Article Forum: Degrowth in Central and Eastern Europe

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

LILIAN PUNGAS	Institute for Sociology at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany
E-MAIL	lilian.pungas@uni-jena.de
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3867-679X
ONDŘEJ KOLÍNSKÝ	Czech Technical University and the Association for International Affairs in Prague, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	ondrej.kolinsky@cvut.cz
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5966-3269
THOMAS S. J. SMITH	Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU), Munich, Germany
E-MAIL	thomas.sid.smith@gmail.com
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4381-9409
OTTAVIA CIMA	Institute of Geography, University of Bern, Switzerland
E-MAIL	ottavia.cima@unibe.ch
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9236-6760
EVA FRAŇKOVÁ	Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	eva.slunicko@centrum.cz
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5874-7690
AGNES GAGYI	University of Gothenburg, Sweden
E-MAIL	agnes.gagyi@gu.se
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8124-4530

MARKUS SATTLER	Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Germany
E-MAIL	m_sattler@leibniz-ifl.de
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7253-291X
LUCIE SOVOVÁ	Wageningen University & Research, Netherlands
E-MAIL	lucie.sovova@wur.nl
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2906-2144

ABSTRACT

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.

KEYWORDS	degrowth, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), quiet sustainability, semi-periphery, catch-up development, post-socialism
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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 term[2] 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-Radkowitsch 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-Radkowitsch 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 – KRASTEV 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 Cultivaiting 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; SATTLER 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 Gagyi (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, grassroot 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; REKHVIASHVILI 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 (BRKOVIĆ 2022: 39). Degrowth sees itself as a third alternative between accelerating globalisation and returning to traditional lifestyles (LATOUR 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 Revisiblising 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 leapfrogging, 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, Gagyi (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 predefined 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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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lilian Pungas is a researcher at the Institute for Sociology at Friedrich Schiller University Jena with a research focus on food self-provisioning at the dachas in Estonia.

Ondřej Kolínský is a green transition researcher at the Czech Technical University and the Association for International Affairs in Prague.

Thomas S.J. Smith is a postdoctoral researcher in Human-Environment Relations at the Department of Geography, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU), Munich.

Ottavia Cima is a geographer based at the University of Bern, Switzerland, who has done work on agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan.

Eva Fraňková is an ecological economist at the Department of Environmental Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Her long-term interests include eco-social enterprises, local economic alternatives and degrowth.

Agnes Gagyi is researcher at the University of Gothenburg, and co-founder of the Solidarity Economy Center in Budapest.

Markus Sattler is based at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (IfL) in Leipzig. His research focuses on diverse and community economies in the South Caucasus.

Lucie Sovová is based at the Rural Sociology Group of Wageningen University, the Netherlands. Her research revolves around alternative economies of food provision.

Degrowth in the Semi-Periphery: Ecology and Class in Central and Eastern Europe

JOSEF PATOČKA	Re-set: Platform for Socio-ecological Transformation, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	josef.patocka@re-set.cz
MARTIN ČECH	NaZemi, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	martin.cech@nazemi.cz
EVA FRAŇKOVÁ	Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	eva.slunicko@centrum.cz
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5874-7690

ABSTRACT	The aim of this extended review essay is to discuss the potential relevance of degrowth-aligned social-ecological transformation for the specific context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). We frame this discussion around three recent books which we consider especially useful for this debate: The Future is Degrowth by Schmelzer et al. (2022, in Czech 2023) for an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the concept of degrowth; Marx in the Anthropocene by Saito (2023) for an ecologically grounded debate on anticapitalist strategies stemming from writings of late Marx; and The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe by Gagyi (2021) that empirically analyses the specific position of the CEE semiperiphery and its implications for a radical social-ecological transformation. We introduce and interlink the main ideas of these books and discuss their implications for the degrowth movement in the CEE context. We argue that to deeply transform our socio-metabolic relation with nature, it is crucial to cultivate and expand spaces of reproductive autonomy, and link them to struggles of labour and social movements. We conclude by emphasising the role of internationalism from below.

KEYWORDS	degrowth, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), semi-periphery, catch-up development, reproductive autonomy, economic alternatives, environmental labour studies
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INTRODUCTION

The word degrowth was famously coined in 1972 by the socialist philosopher and political ecologist André Gorz in a debate on "limits to growth," in the form of a question: *"Is the earth's balance, for which no-growth* [non-croissance] – or even degrowth [décroissance] – *of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?"* (PARRIQUE 2019: 173). The contemporary degrowth movement has taken up the idea seriously, and since its formation about fifteen years ago, it has been developing degrowth explicitly as *"a planned reduction of aggregate resource and energy use in high-income nations designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way"* (HICKEL – HALLEGATE 2022: 4).

Degrowth ideas have been simultaneously developing within a social movement and also within academia, but nevertheless with significant overlap and communication between these two streams. Recently, one of the most topical issues discussed within both academia and the movement has been the strategies for pursuing degrowth in practice, not only at the individual and local level, but – especially – at the national and international level. At the bottom-up level, the degrowth movement supports positive examples of what have been termed "nowtopias" (CARLSSON 2008), i.e. at least partial applications of degrowth principles in living practices, such as the solidarity economy, commons, food sovereignty, free software or trade union movements (TREU ET AL. 2020). However, one of the most important questions is that of the formation of alliances which could produce the social power necessary for their macroeconomic scaling, and for social-ecological transformation on the national and international level.

In the context of this debate, the aim of this review essay is to explore and discuss suitable degrowth strategies in the context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with a specific focus on class and international dependencies. For this purpose, the following three books are introduced and discussed: *The Future Is Degrowth* (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022), *Marx in the Anthropocene* (SAITO 2023) and *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe* (GAGYI 2021). We believe these books offer both a strong theoretical base for interpreting our current socio-ecological crises, and the possibilities for social-ecological transformation in a wide and multidisciplinary perspective. The following text is thus structured

around these three books (sections II–IV) and their conjunctions (section V). Within the discussion and conclusions (section VI), we suggest labour organising and economic alternatives as the key components of strategies for building social power in order to transform the current social metabolism so that it would be more in line with degrowth proposals – in the CEE context more broadly, and in the Czech Republic in particular.

DEGROWTH FOR THE FUTURE: AN UP-TO-DATE OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT

In 2022, Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan's book *The Future Is Degrowth* was published, expanding on Schmelzer and Vetter's original German book *Degrowth/Postwachstum zur Einführung* from 2019. This paperback (published in Czech in 2023) successfully serves as a dense, up-to-date overview of degrowth theory, comprising both a descriptive summary of the relevant literature and concepts, and a normative statement of what degrowth is proposing.

The authors start by discussing definitions of growth: this multi-layered term consists in their perspective of a self-reinforcing idea – coupled with social and material processes – structuring current socio-economic development, which also implies a never-ending quantitative expansion (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 36–74). Similarly to other degrowth literatures, the authors consequently present two main integral parts: a critique of growth and an advocacy of degrowth. Regarding the former, *The Future Is Degrowth* summarises seven points of growth critique, covering a broad range of ecological (PP. 79–93), socioeconomic and cultural (PP. 94–116), anti-capitalist (PP. 117–132), feminist (PP. 133–143), techno-sceptic (PP. 143–157) and post-developmentalist (PP. 157–169) sets of arguments.

For the purposes of this text, the most relevant is the ecological critique (the basic notion of the unsustainability of the current growth-addicted economic system driven by the capitalist imperative of capital accumulation). Here, surplus value is appropriated by the property-owning class, who are driven by competition to reinvest again in more accumulation and expansion. This process happens within globally unequal economic relations *"based on (neo-)colonial appropriation, extractivist exploitation of nature, and the externalisation of social and ecological costs"* (IBID.: 157). This

critique is closely discussed later in this text, with further contextualisation within world-systems analysis.

Degrowth is then offered as a holistic but 'pluriversal' set of ideas, principles and political proposals to overcome the problems of a growth-dependent economy. However, the authors stress that it is an umbrella term for diverse approaches. What brings these together is that degrowth *"stands for a society with a lower social metabolism1 but, more importantly, a social metabolism with a different structure and [sic] that fulfills new tasks"* (IBID.: 193). Such a social metabolism should enable global ecological justice with "right-sized" global and national economies with more equality, social justice and self-determination for their societies' members. This restructuring would necessitate a redesign of institutions and infrastructures to enable this goal, as opposed to capitalist social metabolism, which relies *"mainly on non-circular flows of energy and materials that constantly run through 'the economy' and build up as rising stocks or are released as waste"* (IBID.: 62, 178–211).

To navigate towards a degrowth future, several pathways are proposed by the authors. These include democratisation of the economy, especially modes of ownership, while strengthening the role of the commons as an alternative to the dichotomy of private and state forms of ownership. The redistribution of wealth and higher social security also play a pivotal role in ensuring a dignified life for everyone, regardless of existing economic disadvantages, accompanied by a purposeful decommodification of social life. A democratisation of technological development is also proposed, along with a revaluation of labour and collective self-determination in the workplace, which would lead to the elimination of useless or harmful jobs and stress care work as central to the reproduction of society. Finally, international solidarity is considered by the authors to be central to establishing a truly sustainable and just global community. The specific tools, institutions and policies proposed here include the following, among others: the promotion of the commons, cooperatives and the democratisation of workplaces; universal basic services; working time reduction; tax reforms or moratoria on fossil fuel-intensive sectors such as airports or mega-highways; restructuring of the international monetary system; and designing various forms of participatory economic planning to coordinate the transition to a post-growth model (IBID.: 212–250).

These proposals should materialise, according to the authors, through the convergence of several strategic approaches in the spheres of both state-based politics and civil society. Echoing the discussion of various 'modes' of anti-capitalist politics in the work of Erik Olin Wright (2019), the authors propose four strategic approaches: first, the creation and expansion of "nowtopias" – autonomous spaces where degrowth values are already practised, such as cooperatives, commons or other forms of economic alternatives and self-managed social infrastructures; second, to facilitate the expansion of these alternatives, institutional and political changes in the vein of non-reformist reforms (André Gorz's concept) or revolutionary realpolitik (Rosa Luxemburg's concept): i.e. changes that can be introduced within the current system but which create capacities to radically change it and direct its development towards a post-capitalist or post-growth trajectory; third, the building of a counter-hegemonic movement (taking up Antonio Gramsci's theory) of institutions and practices opposed to the structures of capitalist growth-dependence, which is seen as crucial to enabling the first two approaches; and finally, beyond the simplistic dichotomy of degrowth "by design and disaster", a large-scale disruption of current societal norms in the face of the escalating ecological crisis, which is now seen as inevitable. To succeed, the movement needs to foster a "shock doctrine" of its own, as it should be able to utilise crises to scale-up its capacities, seize institutional power and reorient society towards transformative ends (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 251–284); on the 'shock doctrine' see also Klein (2007), Jones (2018).

The increasing emphasis on strategy in the degrowth discourse (SEE ALSO BARLOW ET AL. 2022) suggests that degrowth now has to face up to the traditional questions of agency and the realities of power, which were historically faced by all proposals for transformative societal change, whether reformist or revolutionary. In other words, who is the subject of the prospective degrowth transformation? What sectors and forces in society could be organised into – in Gramscian terms – the "historical bloc" of degrowth (GRAMSCI 1971)? And what opportunities and barriers will such forces likely face in the international political economy of the prevailing system? How do the concrete manifestations – rather than abstract principles – of the system's operation translate into local economic and political realities? How are new political discourses – including degrowth – received in them?

A certain analytical weakness of degrowth theory in tackling these topics is admitted even internally by many authors on the topic. Schmelzer et al., when summarising the current main challenges and blind spots of degrowth, name precisely its relation to questions of "class and race", and "geopolitics and imperialism" (together with the role of information technology and the problem of economic planning). Tackling these challenges is crucial for the "future of degrowth" on its road from critique and utopia to political practice. On the first issue (class and race), they propose that a certain preoccupation of degrowth discourses with *"ecological issues [...] from a class-blind and consumer-focused perspective"* serves to *"downplay social issues and fundamentally depoliticize degrowth"*. This then (seemingly) *"stands in the way of [...] the development of majorities who would support degrowth positions"* if they recognised its potential to bring broadly enjoyed gains in the quality of life (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 289).

Similarly, on the second question (geopolitics and imperialism), they contend that *"many parts of the degrowth spectrum focus primarily on cultural critiques of or normative discussions about consumer society and the prospects of bottom-up alternatives, side-lining world-systemic relations or a materialist perspective on global power dynamics"*. This leads to the degrowth critique being unclear about under *"which conditions and based on what balance of social forces elites would give up their privileges"*, and thus it risks being perceived as *"naive and unrealistic, [and] constricted to a vision of cultural change"* (IBID.: 291–292). This sentiment is echoed by Parrique, who admits somewhat self-critically in his extensive synthesis of up-to-date degrowth scholarship that the literature is abundant with *"policies for degrowth (what types of policies should be implemented) without paying too much attention to the politics of degrowth (the conditions of their political and cultural feasibility within the current system)"* (PARRIQUE 2019: 710).

These questions are not new. For example, the Marxian tradition criticised the 'utopian socialists' of the 19th century precisely for preferring normative arguments and experimental schemes to concrete inquiries into the structures of social forces shaping real-world prospects for alternatives to capitalist developments (MARX – ENGELS 1969; ENGELS 1970). Later – as the class antagonisms of the 19th century were partially translated into the international struggle between, on the one hand, hegemonic capitalist states, and challenger socialist and decolonial state-based projects on the other

– this analysis was expanded into analyses of capitalism as a single 'world system'. Here, accumulation of capital is mediated not only through the antagonism between classes in the sphere of production, but also through structures of unequal exchange organised by the international state system. This project has drawn not only on Marx and his followers (such as Rosa Luxemburg [1951] with her early explorations of global dynamics of the accumulation of capital, or Trotsky [1980] with his theses on "uneven and combined development"), but also synthesised these authors' thinking with dependency theory and the French *Annales* school of 'total history', among other sources (WALLERSTEIN 2004).

This also means that degrowth scholarship does not have to try to fill its gaps on its own accord. Instead, it can use these and other existing traditions, and adapt them to the context of our current ecological emergency by linking them to research on social metabolism, ecological justice, political ecology and other approaches which degrowth scholarship has been so powerful in foregrounding. In the rest of this review essay, we take up these questions with the aid of two more recent books which can help us fill these gaps in degrowth scholarship within the CEE context.

The first is Kohei Saito's *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, which aims to formulate an unorthodox "ecological Marxism" which is able to articulate the realities of ecology and class while revising many blindspots and misconceptions of traditional "world-view Marxism" (HEINRICH 2012). This enables the expansion of class analysis towards issues of social and ecological reproduction beyond the realm of capitalist valuation and wage-labour. The second is Agnes Gagyi's *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary and Romania*, which takes up the tradition of world-systems analyses and applies them to the realities of CEE. In this book, Gagyi also tackles the ways in which new, predominantly Western-originating discourses – including degrowth – can be received in and adapted for a region characterised by a semi-peripheral position in global value chains and dependent development in the sphere of politics. This also sets the stage for concrete thinking about the ways in which degrowth ideas, practices, and political projects can be operationalised in our context – a theme we take up in the final part.

ECOLOGY AND CLASS: KOHEI SAITO'S *MARX IN THE ANTHROPOCENE*

The work of the Japanese theorist Kohei Saito can be seen as one of the most recent iterations of the decades-old tradition of ecological Marxism. This label broadly refers to projects aiming to combine the analytical apparatus and research programme of historical materialism with insights into ecological change. The idea is that such a synthesis leads to a better understanding of the societal dynamics driving the ecological crisis, as well as the implications of changes in the human relationship to nature for dynamics traditionally understood as exclusively social.

A crucial advance in Saito's approach is that he not only synthesises the insights of various schools and authors in the field of Marxian ecological thought (E.G. O'CONNOR 1991; GÖRG 1999; FOSTER ET AL. 2010; BURKETT 2014, ETC.) and brings together works from greatly varied geographical contexts, including the US, German and Japanese Marxist traditions, but also combines these with observations drawn from lesser-known aspects of Marx's own writings. These are included in Marx's notebooks on the questions of natural sciences and indigenous and non-European cultures, topics to which he apparently devoted much of his studies after the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. These notebooks were recently published as part of the complete edition of the works of Marx and Engels in Germany. On the basis of their systematic review, Saito is able to make a plausible case that towards the end of his life, preoccupation with issues of ecological sustainability and humanity's relationship to its environment came to be a central concern for Marx. Consequently, this interest led him to positions at odds with Prometheanism, techno-optimism and Euro-centrism, which have traditionally characterised much of the "world-view Marxism" later codified by Engels as the quasi-scientific ideology of the workers' movement.

Saito's conclusions have been published in several books, including not only *Marx in the Anthropocene*, but also *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* and *Slow Down: A Degrowth Manifesto* (SAITO 2017, 2023, 2024), the last of which has been a surprise best-seller in Saito's homeland (Japan). Compared to this more popular book, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, is a dense theoretical work, grounding what amounts to a major revision of many 'received truths' of 19th and 20th century Marxist orthodoxy in a critical engagement with

a lineage of Marxian thinkers which begins with the old man himself, and continues through second and third international-era thinkers such as Lukács and Luxemburg all the way up to contemporary authors.

In the first two chapters of the book, Saito's analysis unfolds from the centrality of the notion of metabolism – which was already important for Marx's own thought – for the understanding of the capitalist mode of production. In this view, elaborated more recently by Mészáros (1995) and Foster and his colleagues (FOSTER ET AL. 2010), capitalism (just as any other economic system) cannot be seen only as a historically specific set of relations of production between people – such as the domination of workers by capitalists. It also signifies a reordering of human relations to the environment, with specific configurations and patterns of social metabolism.

In the famous formulation of Marx, later expanded on by Foster, this reordering – by being geared to the growth compulsion resulting from the imperatives of capitalist accumulation – produces an "irreparable rift" in the fabric of natural metabolic cycles and the "web of life" (SEE MOORE 2000, 2015). This happens – to use an observation made by Marx in *Capital* – for example, when the fertility of the soil is being undermined by the export of nutrients to cities, where they pollute the waterways instead of being returned to replenish the land. Faced with crises of its own making and propelled onwards by the imperatives of growth, capital responds by shifting the rift either in space, in time, or by means of technological fixes. In this way, the crisis in early modern European agriculture was 'solved' first by the import of guano and nitrates from Latin America, and then by the invention of the Haber-Bosch synthesis, which enabled mass production of artificial fertilisers, in consequence adding to the problems of both climate change and nitrogen overload.

Thus, metabolic rifts under capitalist growth are never solved, but only shifted and expanded on a progressively larger scale. This leads to the expansive dynamic of disruptive ecological change spanning from local soil exhaustion to the contemporary overshoot of "planetary boundaries" (ROCKSTRÖM ET AL. 2009; STEFFEN ET AL. 2015). This disconnection is also the starting point of the uneven development polarising the capitalist system geographically into its cores and peripheries – a pattern recognised by world system scholars, and later conceptualised as "ecologically unequal

exchange" by Hornborg and Martínez-Alier, among others (HORNBORG 2001; HORNBORG – MARTINEZ-ALIER 2016). *"Capitalist production,"* as Marx points out, *"therefore only develops [...] by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker"* (MARX 1976: 638). These considerations are developed by Saito in the next two chapters through an ontological-epistemological debate on their implications for the nature of human relationships to the non-human world. More interesting for our purposes here are the last three chapters, where two crucial arguments detailing the practical implications of Saito's brand of eco-Marxism are developed.

In the first argument, the late Marx's scepticism towards the "historically progressive" character of capitalist development is extended by Saito to the critique of capitalist development of productive forces, i.e. technological 'progress' and the associated, more contemporary visions of human emancipation based on further development of technology and the replacement of human work by automation. Such socialist visions, Saito contends, are naively utopian, not only because they disregard ecological reality and its limits for such prospects, but also because they are over-optimistic about the liberating potential of technology itself. Here, Saito builds upon Marx's notion of the distinction between formal and real subsumption of labour by capital – where capital in its development increasingly not only appropriates the product of labour (formal subsumption), but also reorganises the labour process itself to maximise value extraction (real subsumption). Technological development, Marx contends, frequently serves as a tool not to liberate, but to better control workers. This reality has been most recently illustrated by developments in various digital, data-based, and algorithmic methods of surveillance and control in what has been termed "platform capitalism" (SRNICEK 2016; WOODCOCK 2021).

The increasing disconnection between "conception and execution" (BRAVERMAN 1998) at work turns workers into mere appendages of machines, who lose their freedom as soon as they enter the workplace. Thus, and this is Saito's second argument, the struggles of workers are not – and should not be – aimed only at appropriating more of the surplus value, or even the forces of production as they stand (as in the orthodox Marxian vision of social change ensured simply by a change in the ownership of the means of production). In Saito's view, a material reorganisation of the labour process is necessary to give people more autonomy both at work,

and, even more importantly, *from* work in the form of free time. This echoes debates in degrowth scholarship on convivial technologies (VETTER 2018) or post-work (GEROLD ET AL. 2023). Rather than further technological development and acceleration along the vectors determined by the imperatives of accumulation, Saito argues, emancipation demands a re-appropriation of the productive forces, and their transformation in a way which would make them amenable to democratic control.

This point is then developed by Saito into a vision of societal transformation towards a post-capitalist mode of production (a "degrowth communism") where the metabolic rift is overcome by reintegrating social metabolism with the reproductive cycles of non-human life. This occurs through largely localised circuits of social reproduction based on radically democratic forms of common ownership, which erode the drive for accumulation. Here, post-capitalist "radical abundance" (HICKEL 2019) and well-being within ecological limits are not secured by the further development of productive forces, the growth of commodity production, and individualised consumption, but rather by decommodifying the meeting of basic needs (such as food, housing, health, education and transport) through accessible public services and various forms of commons (DE ANGELIS 2017).

Both 'ancient' forms of communal ownership and production, which are reminiscent of pre-modern and non-European rural communes, and modern forms of commons, such as universally accessible basic services, would thus combine to form a sphere of "communal luxury" (ROSS 2016). The resulting radical revaluation of work and redistribution of access to resources would create a virtuous cycle undermining the compulsion to compete on the labour market, shrinking the sphere of wage labour and commodity production ('the realm of necessity'), and liberating human needs and wants in an expanded sphere of leisure, creativity and free activity (the 'realm of freedom'). Obviously, where exactly this boundary would be positioned and how it would be structured depends on both cultural factors and bio-physical constraints.[2]

This vision is largely aligned with what we find in the degrowth literature, and we could reasonably ask if we needed to go back to Marx's long-forgotten notebooks to arrive at such conclusions. Saito's approach also resonates with earlier eco-feminist literature, which has expanded the Marxian

analysis from the sphere of capitalist production – and the associated image of the industrial worker as the privileged agent of change – towards more holistic analyses of social and ecological reproduction. For example, this perspective was developed already by the 1970s by Marxist feminist authors – who are unfortunately not engaged with by Saito – such as Maria Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, whose pioneering work showed how the 'tip of the iceberg' in the form of industrial commodity production rests on the unpaid and subsistence labour of women, peasants and ecosystems (MIES – BENNHOLDT-THOMSEN 1999).

Notably, Saito's notion of communism is rooted in localised forms of radical political and economic democracy both in the workplaces and within communities, underscoring the substantial difference of the degrowth programme from the authoritarian statism of the 'actually existing' socialisms of the previous century. Coming closer in this way to positions of libertarian or democratic socialism, it obviously opens crucial practical political questions about the role of the state and political sovereignty in its programme – questions that Saito also leaves more or less unanswered. Similarly, it is regrettable that Saito does not engage with the issue of how to tackle the growth imperative inherent in the structure of capitalist monetary systems and financial markets, and what it would take to replace their role as a mechanism of economic coordination (apart from his cursory remarks about planning).

Thus, we could claim that perhaps the greatest strategic-political advantage and novelty of Saito's perspective lies in its creating an analytical framework which allows us to articulate the struggles of workers within the sphere of wage-labour and capitalist production with attempts to defend and expand subsistence, commons and cooperative-based economic alternatives. In terms of practical political implications, this is a sea change from the former "world-view Marxism", where pre-capitalist social forms are taken for backward remnants that are to be swept away by the rise of capitalism. Here, on the contrary, they are understood as crucial sites of struggle and potential seeds of communism conceptualised as a "higher form of the archaic type". Marx's own entertainment of this possibility is well illustrated by his letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich. Here, against her "Marxist" compatriots with a more Promethean and stagist conception of history, he defends the possibility

of the traditional Russian agrarian commune, the *mir*, becoming the starting point for a non-capitalist future. As such, this would skip – today we might say 'leapfrog' – the capitalist stage of development and the full privatisation and marketisation of agriculture.

Saito's vision of degrowth communism is in this respect not very different from other visions of reproductive autonomy, which are described in various ways under the labels of the commons movement (DE ANGELIS 2017), new cooperativism (SCHOLZ – SCHNEIDER 2017; SCHNEIDER 2018), solidarity economy (MILLER 2010; KAWANO – MATTHAEI 2020), new municipalism (KISHIMOTO ET AL. 2020), diverse economies (GIBSON-GRAHAM – DOMBROSKI 2021), community wealth building (HANNA – KELLY 2021), or economic localisation (DOUTHWAITE 1998; FRAŇKOVÁ 2015) – what degrowth would term as 'nowtopias'. However, it can provide a useful perspective on the limits to their scaling, and the strategies for overcoming such barriers.

As De Angelis reminds us, these alternative economic ideas are too often overly focused on the 'endogenous' characteristics of non-capitalist alternatives, such as their institutional design or the motivations of their participants. Nevertheless, the fate of non-capitalist value circuits is often determined even more by the 'exogenous' factors derived from the dominant socio-economic system, where capitalist and state actors either destroy them through enclosure, or co-opt them by using the non-paid labour of their participants to cheapen the costs of social reproduction and press down wages (DE ANGELIS 2017). To survive, they need to link together to create broader, more diverse and resilient ecosystems, or create political alliances with social movements, adding to their social and political power in the face of capitalist competition.

In this perspective, non-capitalist alternatives are inherently worthy as potential starting points for the expansion of communal forms of ownership and cooperative modes of production. However, their defence and construction should, in Saito's view, be articulated alongside the struggles of workers from within capitalist production. Turning the obsession of liberal environmentalism with individual consumption on its head, Saito thus reclaims our agency within production to challenge the forces driving capitalist growth and ecological collapse. Here, Saito's approach opens the way towards a synthesis of the alternative economic ideas mentioned

earlier with approaches trying to realise this potential of workers as actors in the ecological transformation, such as environmental labour studies (RÄTHZEL – UZZELL 2011; UZZELL – RÄTHZEL 2012), working-class ecology (BARCA 2012; BARCA – LEONARDI 2018; HUBER 2022), ecological syndicalism (GUTIÉRREZ – DIETRICH 2023), or practical climate mitigation strategies aiming to leverage trade union support for public ownership to drive decarbonisation (SWEENEY 2014, 2023; SWEENEY – TREAT 2017A, 2017B; CHAVEZ 2023).

Saito's analysis thus gives us a useful lens for looking for the potential sources of agency which could serve to develop the basics for a 'politics of degrowth'. Clearly, to be useful for further research and experimentation in practical political projects, such a lens has to be applied to concrete situations and dynamics.

WORLD-SYSTEM INTEGRATION IN CEE: AGNES GAGYI'S POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In what follows, we will try to situate such an analysis within the specificities of our region, drawing on the work of Agnes Gagyi, a Hungarian sociologist. Her book *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe* synthesises the insights of her long-standing research on how the region is integrated into global capitalism and impacted by the dynamics of the latter's global crisis since the 1970s (SEE ALSO ARRIGHI 2010). The aim here is to show how these forms of integration translate into the political developments of CEE societies. While not referencing degrowth explicitly as a central concern, Gagyi's book can serve as a useful handbook for thinking about its prospects as a political project in the CEE region.

Gagyi works in the tradition of world-systems analysis, a research programme which has, since the 1970s, brought together insights from multiple social science perspectives to try to understand capitalism as an integrated "world system" (WALLERSTEIN 2004; ARRIGHI 2010). From this perspective, locally observable phenomena can only be understood in the context of the whole system as a single unit of analysis – defined by its overarching goal of endless accumulation of capital. This results in dynamics of unequal development, polarising the world into core and periphery regions.

This process is organised politically through the interstate system of nominally sovereign states, whose fates, however, are largely defined by their position in the system as a whole.

Precisely these concerns – resonant with the questions of the sources and limits of agency we posed earlier – occupy the first of the four chapters of Gagyi's book. She especially criticises the tendency of dominant social movement theory to universalise the conditions of its origin in Western welfare-capitalist countries (what the world-systems tradition would call the core of the system, as opposed to its peripheries) of the post-war era. In her view, this produces a time-space bias in which social movements are often conceptualised as institutions of self-correction in an essentially functional framework of 'liberal democracy'. Apart from obfuscating more long-term historical processes, where social movements are rather actors of conflicts of interest between social groups, this makes Western-oriented narratives poor conceptual tools for understanding the dynamics of movements on the system's (semi-)peripheries.

Even though this understanding has been partially corrected by the post-2008 eruption of movements which question the logic of the system as a whole in the wake of the financial crisis, this bias, Gagyi claims, persists in both their self-understanding and theoretical conceptualisations. In what she calls the narrative of the "crisis of democratic capitalism", the post-war Western economic model of class compromise and sustained growth in wages and consumption, is imagined as a historical norm. The resulting idea is that the core could return to this norm, and that peripheries could catch up with it if only social movements struggled enough. The historical exceptionality of the Western experience – its dependence on (post-)colonial exploitation of the majority of humanity on the system's peripheries, overconsumption leading to ecological crisis, and gendered hierarchies between productive and reproductive labour – is thus hidden from view, and so are the limits of social-movement agency.

On the contrary, if – as Gagyi insists – we understand the long crisis of the system as a logical consequence of previous expansion and overaccumulation, the inevitable conclusion is that defending privileged positions in the system can only come at the expense of the majority of people and ecosystems. Moreover, it allows the dominant classes to conveniently play

various fractions of the working-class majority against each other. Western, core-country movements, typically led by downwardly-mobile middle class elements, are thus somewhat conflicted between such a defence of privileged positions – even if voiced in a seemingly progressive language of nostalgia for the lost paradise of social democracy – and more transformative proposals aiming at post-capitalist forms of "reproductive autonomy", such as solidarity economy or degrowth. In the same vein, movements in the peripheries and semi-peripheries have often been – and still are – portrayed in terms of 'catching-up' with the Western norm. We have seen this in our context in post-socialist discourses of the 'building of civil society', which were later re-actualised using the narrative of 'democratic backsliding'. In this way, local specificities are portrayed as cultural deficiencies, not as structural effects of world-historical processes. According to Gagyi, movements need a better understanding of their situation to coordinate across different positions and scales, and thus to better tackle the double crisis of capital overaccumulation and ecological disruption.

Gagyi turns to the CEE region and its specific conditions in the next two chapters. The politics of the region, she claims, are to a great extent determined by its position in the world-system, which can be historically described as "semi-peripheral". The region's economies are not based on the leading technological sectors occupying the 'top positions' of global value-chains in the core, but they are not just providers of raw materials either – rather, they typically find themselves somewhere in the middle. Composed of a patchwork of territories inhabited by small nations and squeezed between major imperial projects, the countries of the CEE region have for centuries experienced the dynamics that are typical of dependent development, namely that they were led by a hegemonic core state and capital actors, which then acted as an internal force shaping their societies.

Dependent development in semi-peripheral regions is characterised by several typical features. First, there is the structural heterogeneity of their economies, which leads to high levels of internal polarisation of their societies and politics, where core and periphery processes co-inhabit the same territories. The pressures resulting from the need to maintain the conditions for external integration while dealing with their internal consequences then typically lead to the creation of political coalitions around the developmental projects of trying to escape from the dependent position

by 'catching up' with the core countries. This involves attempts to outrun the growth dynamics of the system in order to get to the top of the value chains. A typical characteristic of these coalitions is an ideological identification with the hegemonic actors, while the given country's society is seen as 'lagging behind' them. Unfortunately, as the dependent position is for the most part a structural effect of integration and is not conditional on the 'efforts' of the particular country, any success of such projects is historically an exception to the rule. On an ideological level, such projects and their associated ideologies therefore deserve Giovanni Arrighi's label of "developmentalist illusion" (ARRIGHI – MARTIN 1990). The decades-long cycles of the formation, failure and renewal of such projects thus create the characteristic dynamic of semi-peripheral politics.

Another typical feature of these cycles is the contradictory position of the middle class: during the failures of previous projects of catch-up development, the middle classes typically identified with the demands of the working class and strove to bring them under their political leadership, adopting ideologies which obscure differences of interests. In consolidating the next hegemonic order, however, they typically preferred developments that would safe-guard their privileged positions and white-collar jobs. This dynamic played out repeatedly in the revolutionary developments and transitions in the region of the 19th and 20th century, as detailed over the course of the second and third chapters of Gagyi's book.

Gagyi claims this model also largely applies to the semi-peripheral CEE varieties of socialism (SZALAI 2005) of the communist era. While ideologically committed to presenting an alternative to the capitalist world-system, they were at the same time structurally dependent on it through trade relations, not to mention the conception of socialism as essentially a form of development set to 'catch up with and overtake' the capitalist adversary.

As Gagyi describes, the post-socialist transition has brought about a reintegration into Western, democratic and capitalist structures, which was once again presented as a project of 'catching up' with Western living standards. When this project started to run into trouble after the 2008 financial crisis, the liberal, post-1989 'politics of backwardness' was increasingly challenged by new social coalitions, which typically framed their demands in nationalist terms. This led to the successes of political forces

such as Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, or Kaczyński's Law and Justice party in Poland. These have typically been able to mobilise parts of the working classes that were 'left behind' by previous neoliberal developments. Crucially, however, they then tended to stabilise the conditions of external dependency and export economies based on cheap labour in the interests of capital, both domestic and international. In the absence of explicitly class-based identifications and movements able to challenge dependency and exploitation directly, the politics of the CEE region polarises around the symbolic relation to the hegemon. This leads to a mutually reinforcing opposition between what Gagyi has already earlier called "antidemocratic populism" and "democratic antipopulism" (GAGYI 2016).

Gagyi's analysis can be useful for contextualising degrowth in the CEE region for various reasons. Examples of the trajectories of middle class politicisation in different contexts provide reference points for how we can imagine changing experiences – linked to the uneven dynamics of capitalist development and crisis – being articulated politically in multiple ways. This is shown, for example, in the aforementioned internal ambiguity in post-2008 Western middle class politics between the defence of social-democratic gains premised on global inequality and ecological unsustainability, and more transformative projects that are often aligned with the degrowth perspective.

In the context of the repeated failures of catch-up development, as described by Gagyi, we could perhaps expect that the degrowth proposition could be all-the-more successful in the CEE semi-peripheral conditions, since it could serve as an antidote to the illusions of developmentalism and as a framework for thinking of more realistic strategies for achieving a good life (SEE SCHOENING 2018). However, this seems highly unlikely in the face of the dominant forms of politicisation in the wake of the 2008 crisis. The "anti-populist democrats", who explicitly defend the region's integration into Western hegemonic structures, often perceive degrowth as a heresy questioning the basic assumptions of development. The "antidemocratic populist" counter-movement, on the other hand, does not frame its goals in any substantive alternative to development as such, but rather as a new strategy for development, this time relying on a more benign, 'national' form of capitalism. This is often framed as a new project of catching-up and occupying the top positions in value chains – in leftist versions of the

narrative this is seen as key to more redistribution (E.G. FASSMANN ET AL. 2019) – which hides and preserves the subordination of labour, the devastation of nature, and the superiority towards the Global South in the name of growth.

This new edition of the developmentalist illusion in nationalist garb is aided by ideological structures. Namely, the resentment of Western hegemony and the inability to catch-up with the levels of Western consumption – the "imperial mode of living" (BRAND – WISSEN 2018) – is not framed in terms of identification and solidarity with the majority world, but rather coupled to racist narratives, which are reinforced by political mobilisations against migration. This resentment is also deployed against the Western push for ecological modernisation and 'green capitalism'. This is led by an alliance of dirty industries and segments of the middle and working classes impacted by the unequal effects of such modernisation on their livelihoods and on semi-peripheral parts of industrial value chains. In this context, it is easy to imagine how swiftly degrowth can be dismissed as another top-down agenda using environmentalist rhetoric to legitimise austerity and dependent forms of economic integration.

To escape such a fate, it makes sense to follow Gagyi's emphasis on practices producing new forms of alliances through concrete projects of self-organisation. This seems important for at least three reasons: first, her framework makes it clear how the prospects for a practical politics of degrowth in the CEE region are dependent neither on being recognised as such by the West, nor simply on transplanting practices recognised in the West into the region. Rather, concrete forms of social practices that are already in place – often not framed in the language of degrowth at all – should be looked for as starting points for further developments. As we will see, two examples of such starting points can be the non-capitalist forms of subsistence food production that are common in CEE countries, and the labour struggles arising from the changes in the CEE economies.

Secondly, instead of a fixation on Western hegemony – either in trying to catch up with it or in affirming ourselves by negating it – we would do well to learn from the emancipatory politics of social movements in other semi-peripheries and peripheries of the Global South. We have much more in common with them than our societies usually want to admit. And thirdly, it seems that the success of any kind of truly transformative politics in our

ecologically constrained conditions hinges on the willingness of middle class actors to at least partially overcome the structural constraints of their relatively privileged position by willingly accepting lower consumption standards, which would also be conducive to the overcoming of class hierarchies (a perspective largely aligned with the degrowth ethos). Crucially, this cannot happen purely on an ideological level, but it has to happen through practices in which a sense of meaning and community substitutes for the meeting of needs through material consumption – practices which will not arise spontaneously and have to be organised through institutions such as movements, community organisations and economic alternatives. In the final discussion, which follows, we will turn to ideas and questions which could guide such practices in the Czech context.

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN THE BROADER CEE CONTEXT

Drawing on Saito, we framed the hypothesis for the political operationalisation of the degrowth agenda as the need to couple working-class struggles for redistribution to the creation of autonomous circuits of reproductive economies. With Gagyi, we can consider how to situate practices leading in this direction in the concrete realities determined by our position in the capitalist world-system. In what follows, we try to summarise several hypotheses and questions which could guide this process and further related research.

As empirical studies show, the level of dependence of the Czech economy, especially on Germany, is "extreme" even in international comparison (ŠVIHLÍKOVÁ 2015; MYANT – DRAHOKOUPIL 2016; KRPEC – HODULÁK 2018). This is accompanied by well-known features such as high levels of foreign private-sector ownership, which allows for exceptional outflows of profits abroad, comparatively low wages and significant regional inequalities. It of course does not help that – in contrast to other CEE countries, such as Poland, Slovenia or Croatia – a significant, openly left-wing party-political alternative has failed to emerge in the wake of the worsening social situation and the obvious crisis of the post-1989 liberal model. On the contrary, the opening presented by this crisis has been filled by the increasingly nationalist oligarchic formation of Andrej Babiš and his ANO party. The party-political landscape is thus occupied largely by two openly pro-capitalist blocs,

which significantly reduces the prominence of anti-systemic narratives in public discourse (SLAČÁLEK – ŠITERA 2021).

We can nevertheless claim (following Gagyi) that the political-economic integration of the Czech Republic severely limits the possibilities for achieving change in it through any conventionally conceived, state-based institutional channels, which would be the case even if there was a strong left-wing presence in its parliamentary politics. Even if changing the structures of the Czech dependent capitalism became the priority of the government through a democratic mandate for such a programme, most historically tested tools of trying to alter the terms of integration would be impossible to use due to EU rules under which *"almost all standard instruments of industrial policy and support of domestic capital formation are illegal"* (KRPEC – HODULÁK 2018: 85). Even the emergence of a successful electoral force wielding state power for transformative ends is hard to imagine without significant social power supporting it from the sphere of civil society.

Krpec and Hodulák (2018), in line with thinking that we could label as post-Keynesian, suggest at least trying to foster a higher share of workers' wages from surplus value through a combination of raising wages in both the public sector (leading to competition with the private sector for workers) and industrial sectors focused on high-end consumer articles (where huge sunk costs of investments make relocation unlikely). Even such a reformist course of reversing some of the worst impacts of the Czech dependent integration is hard to imagine without a determined strategic action by a revived and combative labour movement. It is notable that Czech unions have walked some way in this direction (MYANT – DRAHOKOUPIL 2017). However, while their public campaigns have been successful in raising the issue of 'cheap labour' in the public debate, stagnant membership numbers and an inability to successfully organise new sectors remain. Thus, Czech unions have failed to achieve the leverage that would be necessary to substantially challenge the entrenched economic model, condemning themselves to largely defensive struggles in the current inflationary crisis.

The rebuilding of working-class power seems equally important to any degrowth agenda, even if it would aim for more than trying to safeguard and raise the workers' share of surplus value amidst heightening international competition. It is hard to imagine an even more radical redistributive

agenda – such as that detailed by Schmelzer et al. (2022) – succeeding without significant gains in the balance of power in society for labour over capital. For example, the agency of workers seems essential for defending and expanding universal basic services, which is crucial for achieving a high quality of life with relatively low consumption (VOGEL ET AL. 2021). It is also crucial for socialising and transforming production in much of the current private sector, which would be necessary for "democratising the social metabolism" and equitably reducing throughput. While on an abstract level, post-Keynesian and degrowth proposals might seem contradictory to each other, we can claim that in practice there is a substantial overlap between them in their mutual strategic orientation towards challenging the neoliberal model of capitalism, and their common need to bolster the capacities of organised labour. At least initially, the differences may manifest in practice, mainly in emphases on which parts of the working classes to organise. Whereas the post-Keynesian pro-growth strategies would tend to focus on more narrowly conceived struggles around wages in profitable industrial sectors, a more degrowth-informed syndicalism might highlight the importance of public services, care-work, and other more reproductive sectors – and seek to link them to other social and ecological movements and reproductive economic initiatives (SEE ALSO BARCA 2019).

It is also certain that this shared field of practice on the uneven terrain of changing capitalist labour relations will be impacted by the same trends in the coming years, to which any project aiming at rebuilding working-class power will have to respond. For example, the incipient reorganisation of global value chains in the automotive industry is now poised to significantly restructure a sector comprising a large proportion of the Czech industrial workforce – as the Czech automotive industry accounts for around 9% of Czech GDP (SAP 2024). The transition towards electro-mobility is potentially threatening for much of the Czech automotive industry workforce because electric cars require significantly fewer components to assemble – precisely the components that many Czech and other CEE subcontractors, positioned in the mid-levels of value-chains, are producing. Thus, while workers and the industrial trade unions representing them are at least initially likely to challenge the transition as such, it is precisely their dependent position that gives them very little ground to do so, as most of the relevant decisions are made elsewhere (GAŽO ET AL. 2022; GALGÓCZI 2023). A different potential strategy could be to proactively support

the transition to electro-mobility to competitively bolster the position of the CEE countries in its value chains – a strategy that is already visible, for example, in the contemporary Hungarian battery boom (CZIRFUSZ 2023). But even if new work-places were successfully created in this way, it would still present a significant challenge for the labour movement to organise the workers in them.

A degrowth or post-growth framework can be useful for imagining strategies for both workers and ecological movements beyond the simplistic binary of either opposing or promoting a 'green transition from above' made on capital's terms. These could serve as a basis for a politics of a 'green transition from below', where the essentially defensive struggles of workers would be approached as starting points for empowering them to act as protagonists in the restructuring of production in the direction of social and ecological needs. The Italian GKN factory – where, upon the notice of the factory's closure and layoffs, workers have occupied the plant, which formerly produced car axles, and are now planning to convert it to produce cargo-bikes and solar panels – is a case in point (FELTRIN – LEONARDI N.D.).

Consequently, if the aim of the degrowth movement is not only to redistribute a larger part of the capitalist surplus, but also to produce non-capitalist forms of social reproduction and scale up already-existing forms of subsistence and cooperative economies into a post-capitalist economic system, the logical question to ask is which forms of social practices would today form such 'already existing degrowths' in Czech society. It is not a coincidence that much of the Czech degrowth scholarship has been focused in this direction, with a long-standing tradition of research on economic alternatives such as local producer and consumer cooperatives, alternative food networks, or municipal enterprises oriented towards locally determined social and ecological needs (JOHANISOVÁ ET AL. 2012; FRAŇKOVÁ 2015; JOHANISOVÁ 2013; JOHANISOVÁ 2016). A significant feature of the CEE region in this regard that was also highlighted in degrowth scholarship and connected to the historically semi-peripheral character of its economies, has been the continued presence of many non-market subsistence strategies of social reproduction. Termed as "quiet sustainability" (SEE, E.G., SMITH – JEHLIČKA 2013 AND SOVOVÁ – VEEN 2020), practices such as food self-provisioning in allotment gardens, or DIY repair and tinkering, often continue to provide a significant contribution to CEE households'

efforts to make do with lower incomes. However, while Western community gardens and fab-labs are described as "degrowth nowtopias", such practices in CEE are often written off as "relics" testifying to the region's backwardness (PUNGAS 2019; GEBAUER ET AL. 2023).

The challenge here, we would claim, is less to reframe such practices as positive and achieve a symbolic recognition of them than to think of practicable strategies for their networking and scaling up into resilient ecosystems of value circulation based on material interests. Among other things, this means asking how they can become meaningful, conscious strategies of subsistence and social reproduction rather than simply lifestyle alternatives for middle-class consumers or locally embedded "islands of positive deviation", and how they can become viable for workers still predominantly dependent on wage-labour. To this end, such alternatives would need to respond to the needs of such target groups, for example, their basic needs which are endangered by the contemporary cost-of-living crisis affecting spheres such as food, housing and energy. Promising (even if small) examples of such strategies of bottom-up decommodification already exist in the form of alternative food networks, housing cooperatives such as the Czech "Shared Houses" network, and incipient forms of energy cooperativism emerging in the wake of EU support for "community energy" (AMPI 2024; SDÍLENÉ DOMY 2024; HNUTÍ DUHA 2024).

To this end, it would make sense to look for inspiration less in the core capitalist regions of the West and more to the Global South – for example, the union-co-op collaborations in the Indian state of Kerala (KURUVILLA 2019) or the social movements in Bolivia (ZIBECHI 2010). Alternatively, in the absence of institutional power on the state level, municipalities can serve as possible actors for such local networking and scaling-up of cooperative networks, a model labelled community wealth building. Interestingly, this has been pioneered in areas impacted by de-industrialisation – such as, famously, the British city of Preston (BROWN – JONES 2021). We can imagine an adaptation of this model for Czech and other CEE areas meeting a similar fate. Already existing models of local bottom-up activity led by municipalities, for example, the so-called 'local action groups', could be reframed as segments of the solidarity economy, and encouraged to go beyond the neoliberal paradigm. Also interesting here are direct, defensive forms of organising around the crisis of social reproduction, such as the Czech Tenants

Initiative – a local outcrop of the general surge in tenant struggles in the face of the housing crisis (INICIATIVA NÁJEMNÍKŮ A NÁJEMNIC 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Coming full circle, the central questions to ask would then be the following: What are the features of our situation on both sides of the equation outlined above? What are the specific, already-existing forms of alternative reproductive strategies which should be consolidated and expanded? What are the changing forms of working class self-activity contingent on the pressures resulting from our external integration, and how can they be oriented towards a common horizon? And on that basis, how can social power be built along such chains of exploitation in various spheres of social reproduction from the ecosystem, the household and the community up to the office, the factory and, finally, international systems of politics, finance and trade? To this end, in what we have outlined above, we attempted to think through ways to implement the strategy for degrowth as presented by Schmelzer et al. (2022) in our own local context. Crucially here, as per Gagyi's argument, forms of organising people and bringing them together around shared interests would be necessary for overcoming the narrow bounds of optimising one's own relatively privileged position within the system, and thus enabling the creation of counter-hegemonic forms of common-sense.

Recovering working-class agency from within the capitalist metabolism, and connecting alternative practices to its struggles within and through institutions could enable the building of materially rooted social power. This could scale up to the higher institutional levels – including the state – which is necessary for challenging the terms of external integration within the EU and beyond. This might lead us to the conclusion that only on such a basis will it make sense to think through the questions properly pertaining to what is usually approached as the subject matter of the study of international relations – for example, the forms of geopolitical alliances which might allow for the democratisation of international trade relations. Nevertheless, as Gagyi reminds us, the ability of social movements to effectively challenge the drivers of the current crisis is contingent on their abilities to communicate, mediate conflicts and strategise together across various scales and positions in the system – such as the various 'links' in

the chains of exploitation across both international borders and boundaries between production and reproduction.

From this perspective, international networks of communication, cross-fertilisation and strategising 'from below' with partners in the CEE semi-periphery, actors in the Global South, and allies in countries of the core, seem crucial. This is pragmatically important for resisting the tendency to split social-movement alliances along the geopolitical fault-lines produced by conflicts among elites. Such projects of internationalism from below seem crucial for building pathways towards systemic changes that would challenge and transform structures of growth-dependency, which today are – by their very nature – also international.

Detailing an ambitious societal transformation to face the converging crises of capital overaccumulation and ecological degradation in the 21st century, degrowth scholarship and political thought often lack a concrete analysis of the social forces they aim to mobilise, and the political-economic challenges they are facing. In this piece, we have aimed to fill these conceptual gaps for the purposes of both a Czech and a broader CEE context. This has been undertaken with the help of the delineation of degrowth put forward by Mathias Schmelzer et al., Kohei Saito's synthesis of class and ecological analysis and Agnes Gagyi's work interpreting the politics of our region through the lens of world-systems analysis. In the final discussion, we proposed some hypotheses for the operationalisation of the politics of degrowth in this context. Conceptualised as an articulation of labour organising with economic alternatives, and aiming at reproductive autonomy and the building of social power to transform our socio-metabolic relation with nature, this strategic sketch can serve to orient further research in this direction.

ENDNOTES

1 Social metabolism is a concept and methodological approach used in ecological economics, political ecology and related fields (see, e.g., Martinez-Alier 2009; de Molina 2023). The term also denotes the actual specific set of biophysical flows and requirements (especially in terms of energy and materials, but also space, time, etc.) that are exchanged between nature and society, and within and between societies. These human-controlled biophysical flows are a basic feature of all societies but their magnitude, structure and diversity largely depend on specific cultures, or so-called socio-metabolic regimes (Haberl et al. 2023).

2 There are ongoing debates, for example, about how much 'free time' in a modern sense we could afford in a more subsistence-based economy with a lower energy and material throughput – but Saito does not engage with these debates.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Josef Patočka is a researcher and organiser with Re-set: Platform for Socio-ecological Transformation who focuses on the politics of social and ecological justice in the areas of labour, housing and energy.

Martin Čech is an environmentalist and researcher in the non-profit organisation NaZemi. He is mainly concerned with degrowth theory and its public policies.

Eva Fraňková is an ecological economist at the Department of Environmental Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Her long-term interests include local economic alternatives, social metabolism and degrowth.

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

PENGFEI HOU	School of Political Science and Public Administration at Xinjiang University, China
E-MAIL	dinad@126.com
ORCID	http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8899-8631

ABSTRACT	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.

KEYWORDS	energy security, energy transition, neo-colonialism, CEE countries, degrowth
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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 communatuire* 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 (NKRUMAH 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 Ştefănescu, postcolonialism and post-communism are *"siblings of subalternity"* (ŞTEFĂNESCU 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, depoliticalized (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 (LATOUCHE 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 preconditions (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 (MIŠÍK – 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 neoliberal 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 unrepaid 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 – KARDAŚ 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"* (Żuk 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–Litvínov) 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 Mazeikiai, 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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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Pengfei Hou is Associate Professor in International Relations in the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Xinjiang University, China. His work focuses on CEE countries, energy politics, and EU-China relations.

Sustainability in the Czech Republic: From a Green Growth Laggard to a Degrowth Hotspot

ONDŘEJ KOLÍNSKÝ	Czech Technical University, Prague, Czech Republic
E-MAIL	ondrej.kolinsky@cvut.cz
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5966-3269

ABSTRACT

The Czech Republic is a notorious laggard in green transition policies. This begs the question of how stable the current socio-political setting is and whether it can resist deeper sustainability transitions in the long run. The paper combines institutional literature with sustainability transition research to describe the current situation and outline possible future developments in terms of the economic discourse. It shows that the reluctance towards the green transition may be caused not only by the strong position of incumbents but also by the limited relevance of the green competitiveness approach for the country's situation. Based on recent developments and existing vulnerabilities, the paper identifies the possible strengths of the more radical approach to sustainability entailed in degrowth. Rather than a pure hegemony of one of the niche paradigms, however, it proposes as likely a pluriversal pathway combining elements of both in a patchwork manner.

KEYWORDS	green growth, degrowth, sustainability transition research, pluriversal pathway, semi-periphery
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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability transitions are an understudied field in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (ĆETKOVIĆ – BUZOGÁNY 2016). This has to do partly with a lack of relevant scholarship and partly with methodological difficulties. The existing frameworks cannot be used in regard to CEE without adjustments, and also, the available data on CEE does not fully fit into the models. Yet, CEE offers a very interesting comparison to the more thoroughly analysed Western countries. This is especially true for the Czech Republic, which finds itself in a unique position. On one hand, it is a member of the European Union (EU), sharing some of the most ambitious climate targets worldwide. On the other hand, however, the country is underperforming in sustainability regulations and transition policies, letting them come mostly through market equilibria and mandatory transpositions of European directives (EC 2023A).

This paper looks at the economic discourses framing the Czech (non-)transition. The question is whether the Czech Republic is on its way to embrace green growth, degrowth, or whether it will rather maintain the status quo in its sustainability policies. The analysis is based on the sustainability transition research (STR) framework, but here it is adjusted for social and discursive innovations. It combines insights from STR applications with institutional literature to describe the current situation and determine possible future developments.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides the theoretical background of STR, section 3 adjusts the framework based on some recent suggestions to fit the needs of the present paper, section 4 offers a case study of the Czech energy sector, section 5 analyses the Czech situation with regard to sustainability transition, section 6 discusses the implications of the findings, and section 7 concludes the paper.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

STR was born from a combination of technology studies and evolutionary economics highlighting the path dependency of industrial sectors and whole economies (GEELS 2002). In this perspective, market equilibria are not necessarily

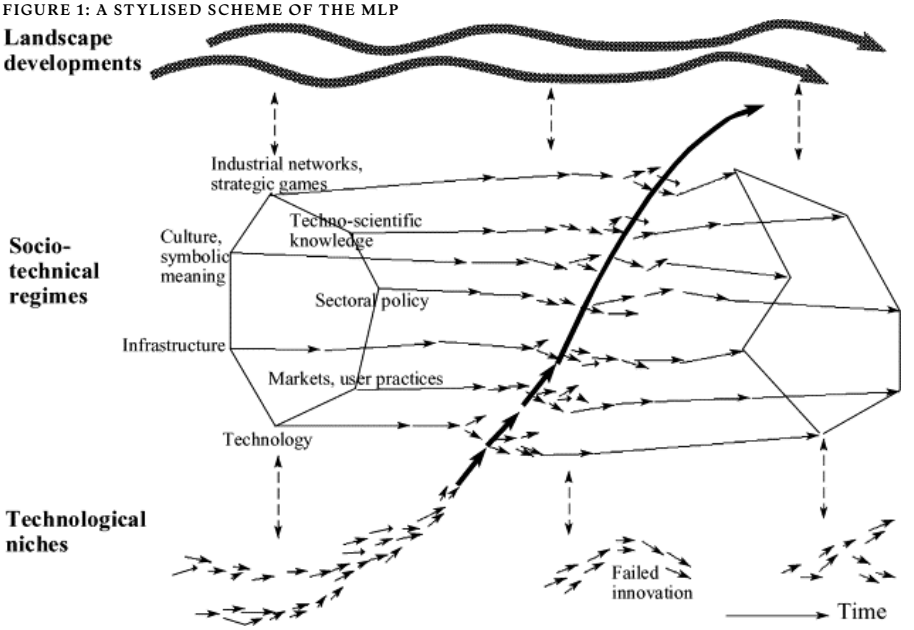
optimal but could be simply the result of a lock-in, a suboptimal market equilibrium that is difficult to leave without coordinated action (UNRUH 2000).

This paper uses the basic framework of the multi-level perspective (MLP), which divides reality into three idealised levels: regime, landscape and niches (GEELS 2002). Know-how, physical capital, infrastructures, business practice, legal frameworks, and local markets then evolve together into an intertwined *sociotechnical regime*, a complex of dominant practices, incumbent firms, and policies. A regime is dynamically stable even as some of its parts are being replaced – it can last for decades without undergoing a major structural change.

STR is particularly interested in technological cycles and the potential of particular innovations to reshape the market and social practices around themselves. Focusing on the relationships between the given regime and niches, it differentiates between complementary and competitive innovations – the former can be incorporated within the existing regime while the latter require a new regime to evolve (SMITH – RAVEN 2012).

Apart from the struggle between the regime and its contenders from the niches, there is a *landscape* level above them. Along with the actual physical landscape, it consists of other slow-to-change factors that determine the conditions of success for any regime. But there can also be unforeseen events on the landscape level that trigger technological revolutions – e.g. extreme weather events or popular movements shifting behaviours or political support.

FIGURE 1: A STYLISED SCHEME OF THE MLP



Source: Geels 2002.

These three levels and the complementarity or competition between niche innovations already provide combinatorial material for several typological pathways of regime change. Geels and Schot (2007) support their typology with stylised case studies from the history of innovations. By looking at particular sectors in specific periods, they are able to track the regime transitions as new inventions cause a cascade of changes in the dominant industrial practice.

There is an inherent consideration for political economy in this view on transitions (GEELS 2014). Regime actors with vested interests naturally do everything in their power to resist innovations that threaten the value of their capital, while niche challengers can attract investors from other industries (HESS 2014). Hess (2018: 179) provides a typology of ideal-type coalitions based on their main focus: alternative industry development, industrial democratisation, industrial opposition, or industrial access. The former two are concerned with "sunrising" new technological and socio-economic elements, while the latter two focus on "sunsetting" incumbent technologies and existing socio-economic injustices, respectively. Note that political

demands or social innovations can enter the framework in a similar way as technological innovations here.

Geels et al. (2016) extend the original pathway typology suggested by Geels and Schot (2007) to account for societal mobilisations, the institutional background, and actors' agency beyond the original proposal. Importantly for the present paper, they extend the market struggle to account for activist and social movement pressures, look into ways that incumbent firms can themselves undergo transformations rather than remain static, and map local background landscape characteristics that remain unchanged, which are especially relevant for comparative studies.

Strategic niche management and transition management are two branches of STR that look specifically for normative guidance to shape transitions towards certain results (KÖHLER ET AL. 2019). They require directionality and goals but also openness on the way toward reaching them and space for errors (KEMP – LOORBACH – ROTMANS 2007). At the same time, regulators also need to be mindful not to create rents and lock-ins on the side of new entrants (NEVER – KEMP 2017). The whole process is conceived of as shaped by the active participation of and feedback by various stakeholders. Later, when distributional, justice, and political inclusion impacts of transition are better understood, public participation is better integrated into the transition governance schemes (UPHAM – SOVACOOL – GHOSH 2022).

STR built its understanding of sustainability on technological systems and innovations. There is a path dependency mechanism at work here too, and even though the topical focus has extended from case studies on technological sectors in Western European countries, the theoretical frameworks are hardwired for this particular context. Fortunately, the reflexive and decolonial nature of sustainability research has led to many critical contributions aiming to overcome these limitations. Below, the problems central for applying STR in the case of the Czech transition discourse are discussed: the focus on the Western institutional environment, national and sectoral framing, and the limited inclusion of degrowth and non-technological innovations.

Sociotechnical regimes in Western Europe are of a different nature than those elsewhere in the world. They developed in a formalised

institutional environment and rest on a highly competitive market. Technological developments in these places then shape sectors and value chains across the world. However, not all of the assumptions of Western European sociotechnical regimes are true for other countries.

Hansen et al. (2018) highlight some general points from the application of STR in developing countries: these countries have weaker states, more unequal social backgrounds, informal institutions and a dependency on foreign capital, knowledge and technologies. This leads to weaker regimes and paradoxically also to weaker niches because of fragmentation. Moreover, distrust and lack of cooperation prevent coordination across niches, and innovations are then confined to individual projects, which limits their potential to scale across innovative platforms (HANSEN ET AL. 2018: 201–202). Analogically, Wieczorek (2018: 208) stresses that the sources of stability of regimes in developing contexts, and therefore also strategies for their destabilisation, remain unclear.

Hansen et al. (2018: 201) warn that in developing countries, sustainability in the narrow environmental sense could be achieved without positive impacts on society and democracy. At the same time, they see the role of technological advancements in these contexts as overshadowed by frugal, grassroots, inclusive and shop-floor innovations.

The Czech Republic is a long way from being a global South country but a strong shared feature of both it and the global South is a dependence on external capital and technologies. Ćetković and Buzogány (2016) cluster it together with the rest of the CEE countries under the category of "dependent market economies" and show that transitions in such contexts are highly sensitive to external pressures. This is in line with findings on the geography of transitions because they do not happen in isolated countries but include the transnational transfer of knowledge and technologies that is essential for niche experimentation (WIECZOREK – RAVEN – BERKHOUR 2015).

An underlying question here is whether there is a global convergence on a sustainable configuration. This would imply, on one hand, seeing the structural paradigm shift happening worldwide in economic, ethical, political and social questions (SCHOT – KANGER 2018). On the other hand this

understanding may reproduce the imaginary of linear development and the distinction between places at the forefront and those catching up (CF. WIECZOREK 2018).

Feola (2020) criticises STR for naturalising the economic system as an invisible background factor setting the rules of the game. The Schumpeterian understanding of competitive relationships and the ensuing process of creative destruction are taken for granted in its view. Vandeventer, Cattaneo and Zografos (2019) note that not all niches hold their own vision of a dominant regime eventually pushing its competitors out of relevance. They suggest that some understandings of sustainability do not fight for hegemony but rather engage in a discussion and a cross-fertilisation with other niches.

Analogically, Feola (2020: 231) differentiates between market-oriented technological innovations that are being *scaled-up*, while post-growth approaches aim for a horizontal expansion into *rhizomatic* links across communities. This connects to an older discussion in strategic niche management on the various directions in which a transition experiment can influence the wider societal practice: scaling up, scaling out, and scaling deep (VAN DEN BOSCH – ROTMANS 2008; MOORE – RIDDELL – VOCISANO 2015). Feola's rhizomatic links refer to *scaling out* here, highlighting that grassroots social innovations are more likely to be collaboratively shared across various communities. Such links might therefore directly address the problem of fragmentation and weak horizontal ties between niches described by Hansen et al. (2018). This underlines the role of social movements for transitions in developing countries in line with Wieczorek's (2018: 206) *"socially embedded model of innovation."*

Vandeventer, Cattaneo and Zografos (2019) conceptualise degrowth as a niche innovation vis-à-vis the capitalist growth regime. This implies that what was before seen as an invisible background (FEOLA 2020) or an automatic part of the landscape rules (E.G. GEELS – SCHOT 2007), BUT TO A CERTAIN EXTENT EVEN GEELS ET AL. (2016) now materialises as a contingent incumbent formation with its own lock-ins, interests, and defensive tactics. It also generates a set of complementary and competitive relationships between the regime and other niches. And not least, it allows for blending together various sectors into a synthesis of the sustainability logics behind the transition, stepping

up the focus from a sociotechnical to a wider societal change, which is convenient for the present paper.

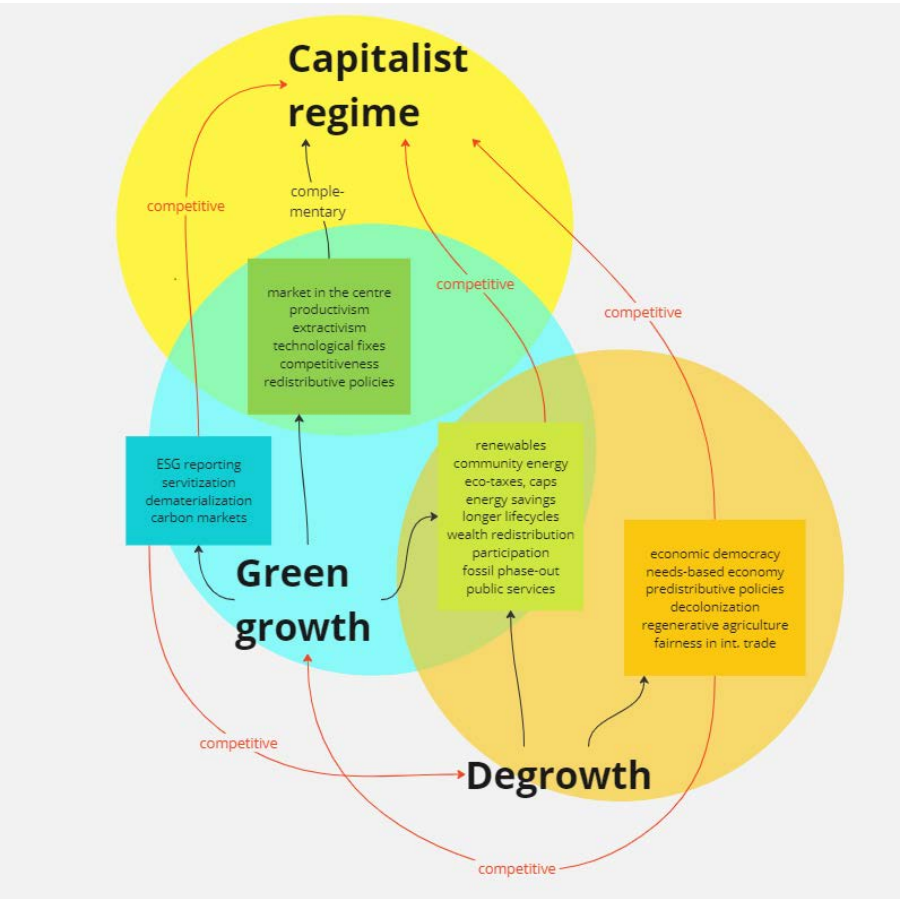
THEORY ADJUSTMENTS AND ANALYSIS FRAMING

The aim of the present paper is to study the green transition in the Czech Republic as a development shaped by the country's economic, institutional, and political contexts. STR offers a valuable basis for this precisely due to its origin in innovation studies because it can capture the complex interplay between various industrial, political and societal forces (KÖHLER ET AL. 2019). The MLP is used here as the backbone structuring the developments. Since the Czech Republic is not at the forefront of technological innovations for sustainability, the insights from technological innovations systems and strategic niche management are used only to a limited extent here. Finally, the prescriptive guidelines from transition management will be referred to only to contextualise current policies.

Focusing on the national context and pooling together various sectors is necessary in order to note the wider economic policy framing between green growth and degrowth but it also poses challenges. On one hand, international influences need to be accounted for in line with the cited geographical adjustments to STR; on the other, the delicacy of sectoral struggles may be lost in an overall national assessment. The latter limitation is addressed here by providing a more detailed insight into the most-researched sector, namely that of energy transition, which also underpins sustainability in many other sectors.

In order to account for the wider discursive framings of green growth and degrowth, the MLP adjustments proposed by Vandeventer, Cattaneo and Zografos (2019) and Feola (2020) are employed. For simplicity, only green growth and degrowth are considered as niches in relation to the present regime or simply the business-as-usual scenario (i.e. no or only minimal sustainability and climate measures). Note that in this simplified model, the synergies between the niches are their shared opposition to the regime, and the complementary features of green growth and the status quo are logical opposites to the points of competition between green growth and degrowth.

FIGURE 2: COMPETITIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY RELATIONSHIPS



The capitalist regime and its incumbents simply aim for changing the status quo as little as possible. However, an acceptable change, and therefore a potential complementary innovation, would be green and climate measures with a minimal impact on the structure of the biggest firms, incumbent politicians and institutions, and the economic and political model in general. Green growth promotes some potentially disruptive innovations such as ESG reporting, servitisation and dematerialisation of the economy, carbon markets (TERZI 2022).[1] Nonetheless, the underlying logic of green growth still rests on productivism, extractivism, technological fixes, international competitiveness, and market-based allocation of resources preceding redistributive policies. These factors point to complementary areas where green growth could be considered an add-on to the current regime without necessarily dismantling it.

Degrowth, here used as an umbrella term for the colourful range of post-growth and a-growth approaches, generally seeks deeper changes. According to degrowth, international trade and relations are to be based on the principles of decolonisation and fairness (LAZARD – YOUNGS 2021; HICKEL ET AL. 2022). Participation is to become a widespread principle, promoting local democratic sovereignty and deliberative tools, including economic democracy and setting limits to market decisions by stakeholders (CUMBER ET AL. 2020). While the desirable role of the state is disputed (D'ALISA – KALLIS 2020), the economy would be based on human needs satisfaction (COOTE 2022), declining material throughput, regenerative agriculture and landscape management, and pre-distributive policies (BARCA 2019). All of these suggestions would disrupt the current regime and are in a competitive relation to green growth proposals.

Importantly though, there are also synergies between the two niches. These would be found in the areas of rapid deployment of renewables (especially when based on community ownership and management), energy savings and retrofitting buildings, prolonging product lifecycles, ecological taxes and caps on extraction and pollution, local participation, redistributive policies (e.g. climate dividend), and improved coverage and quality of public services. All of these areas are competitive vis-à-vis the regime. There is no assumed synergy between degrowth and the regime (but this might change if there were other niches in the model that would, e.g., challenge basic human rights).

There is an open discussion about whether policies complementary with capitalism like ESG reports or green finance would cascade into a deeper shift towards a post-capitalist regime or whether they would serve the incumbents in providing the inevitable reforms and stop short of breaking the regime completely. These two scenarios are analogical to the *reconfiguration* and *transformation* pathways, respectively (GEELS – SCHOT 2007: 406–413). Only here, a higher level of abstraction is employed in line with Vandeventer, Cattaneo and Zografos, so it would be more precise to refer to the former scenario in their terms as a *pluriversal pathway* (2019: 276) where mutually symbiotic but different niches dismantle the capitalist regime and produce a range of place-specific combinations of various features, experiments, and ideas. The other option, where complementary innovations are integrated and contained and result in preserving the regime, can be called *transformed capitalism*. Finally, there is a zero, business-as-usual

scenario, *regime reproduction* as discussed in Geels and Schot (2007), which appears desirable for incumbents but runs the risk of accumulating niche innovations and external pressures that may eventually sweep away the regime in a swift event.

TRANSITION OF THE ENERGY SECTOR

This sub-chapter summarises recent developments in the sustainability transition of the power generation sector, as captured by other authors. This first step allows for concretising the Czech situation through a specific case study, and providing insights that can then be connected to the wider national transition and taken to the more abstract level of overall discourse. The case of the power sector proves instrumental for a number of reasons: i) it stands at the forefront of decarbonised technologies in an inter-sectoral comparison (VICTOR – GEELS – SHARPE 2019: 128), ii) it underpins the transition in many other sectors that depend on low carbon electricity, iii) it is the best-researched sector – STR applications in the Czech Republic to-date have focused almost exclusively on power, and iv) it is strongly affected by the EU regulation and intra-EU trade, while also inspiring national movements and struggles.

Ćetković and Buzogány (2016) pool together European post-socialist economies and identify a number of common features in their energy transitions. They are high corruption and weak state capacity, an inadequate state-industry-science collaboration, lack of transparency and political stability, and benefits flowing to foreign investors and privileged domestic actors. Ćetković and Buzogány (IBID.: 650) specifically observe a "stop and go" dynamic of deploying renewables, and this very well describes the Czech "solar boom" of 2008–2011 and the following long period of stagnation.

A generous feed-in tariff that led the Czech Republic to become a global leader in photovoltaic deployments, was passed in 2005. However, due to its policy design not allowing for much flexibility, an opposition of traditional energy producers and energy-intensive industries quickly formed, which led to a gradual dismantling of the policy from 2010 (GÜRTLER – POSTPISCHIL – QUITZOW 2019). The country met its 2020 renewables targets

early and indeed almost no new renewable sources were installed for the rest of the decade.

Gürtler, Postpischil and Quitzow (IBID.: 9) mention a lack of fossil phase-out policies as one of the pitfalls and this is where political coalitions come to the fore. Ending coal extraction was at the forefront of mobilisation around the *"Limity jsme my"* (We are the limits) movement in 2015 (LJM 2016) and the topic united a wide coalition of environmental and civil society actors (OCELÍK ET AL. 2019). A fossil phaseout with a clear date was first conceived by the Coal Commission in 2021, with a coal phaseout being planned for 2038, but this date was later adjusted to 2033 by the Fiala government (MPO 2021; ÚV 2022).

Ocelík et al. (2019) map the political conflict over coal policies in the Czech Republic and identify two clusters of stakeholders in the two opposing camps. Interestingly, in the Czech Republic, political parties in regions of extraction do not always find themselves on the same side as their national headquarters. The opposition to further coal mining is thus formed mostly by local movements and national parties, and the pro-mining stance is upheld by the fossil firms themselves, trade unions and some local and national politicians (IBID.: 277).

Černý and Ocelík (2020) further map the narrative strategies of the coal incumbents and find that they mostly revolve around economic security. The same narrative resurfaces in the recent threats of the oligarch Pavel Tykač, who said that he would close the coal power plants Chvaletice and Počerady, which employ some 3000 people together with the associated mines (ČTK 2024). At the same time, the environmental movement is strongly concerned with questions of employment and energy poverty connected with the transition (REKTOR-POLÁNEK – PATOČKA 2022; KOLÍNSKÝ – ČECH 2023). This is an important link between energy and economic transition.

The Czech energy sector is closely tied to the German Energiewende policy. Due to cross-border flows, the Czech price is almost fully dependent on the German one (ČERNOCH ET AL. 2016: 44). Since the start of the large-scale development of renewables in Germany, Czech energy producers have seen reductions in their revenues (IBID.: 62). Other impacts of this are technological

and best-practice spillovers and effects mediated via the European policy and renewables deployment targets (IBID.: 2016: 37).

These dependencies may be connected to the reluctance of Czech renewable support policies. The Czech Republic currently has the lowest share of power generated by renewables in the EU (EMBER 2024). Its original National Climate and Energy Plan (MPO 2019) literally undercut the mandatory minimum set by the European Commission (EC 2020: 22). A recent update of the document was welcomed as "ambitious" (OBNOVITELNĚ 2023) but if the share of renewables reached 30 percent in 2030 as planned, the Czech Republic would still remain among the EU states with the lowest share of renewables (EMBER 2024).

The Czech decarbonisation plans are mostly revolving around new nuclear developments despite the criticism of the long approval and construction process, the lack of flexibility in supply, and high costs (ČERNOCH ET AL. 2016; OSIČKA ET AL. 2021; SKLENÁŘ 2023). Osička et al. (2021) suggest that this is precisely because of path dependency influencing both decision makers and information production, leading to further institutional lock-ins of the nuclear technology. This trend continues into the present, as the new State Energy Policy Update proposal foresees the share of nuclear energy growing from 18 percent at present to 32–42 percent in 2050 (MPO 2024).

Since the end of the solar boom, renewables have been entering Czech energy policies mostly through external pressures and the transposition of European-level legislation. While the recent boom in small-scale renewables is mostly motivated by financial reasons and, to a lesser scale, independence (MAKEŠOVÁ – VALENTOVÁ – PILNÁČEK 2023: 6), there is also a growing constituency of community energy producers setting up an autonomous niche (ZINDULKOVÁ 2023). While not explicitly embracing the concept of energy democracy (IBID.: 32, 26–27), Czech community energy pioneers report motivations connected to community building and sustainability on top of the more widespread economic motivations. The niche thus acknowledges the social innovation ambition on top of the technological aspects.

Based on the typology of Hess (2018), all four ideal types of energy transition movements are present in the Czech Republic: alternative industry development (renewables), industrial democratisation (energy

communities), industrial opposition (fossil phaseout), and industrial access (addressing economic injustices). The latter two, associated with sunsetting (technologies and economic practice), are, however, clearly less prominent. This could be explained by the fragmentation of policy formulation described by Ocelík et al. (2019) – while sunrising can be supported in parallel with support to incumbent industries, sunsetting requires a consensus and is more likely to be blocked by the affected coalition.

THE CZECH SITUATION – A MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

The following analysis is structured along the three levels of the multi-level perspective. It aims to capture the present situation and past developments influencing it. Following the situation, key vulnerabilities are discussed as potential shocks threatening the regime. Some implications, possible outcomes and scenarios for the Czech Republic are then elaborated in the discussion.

Landscape

The landscape of the capitalist regime consists of external influences and pressures, namely physical, social, and political ones. With 2023 being again the hottest year on record (NOAA 2024) and climate-related disasters happening all over the world, the attention dedicated to the climate crisis keeps increasing. The same holds true for the mounting inequalities (OXFAM 2023) that were exacerbated and exposed by the pandemic. The Russian aggression in Ukraine and tensions in Taiwan reinvigorated security-oriented narratives. And the related shortage of chips and the US Inflation Reduction Act brought back discussions on protectionism, free trade, and local self-sufficiency.

The EU reached a widespread consensus on combining a pandemic recovery with the green transition and passed the Fit-for-55 package, ratcheting up its climate goal for 2030. The expectations from the 2024 elections for the European Parliament and their impact on the green agenda are, however, mixed at best (WETTENGEL 2023). Degrowth has also been gaining traction in academia (KING – SAVIN – DREWS 2023) and among the public (PAULSON – BÜCHS 2022). The European Parliament hosted its first Beyond Growth conference in April 2023.

The Czech public acknowledges climate change and supports swift and consequential action in this regard (STEM 2022: 9–11). Its knowledge of the Green Deal is, however, extremely limited, with the majority having no or very little information about it and the population is divided between seeing it as a threat, and seeing it as an opportunity (IBID.: 15–18). A more recent communication analysis reveals that the terms "degrowth" and "Green Deal" stir rather negative emotions but 55 percent and 77 percent of the respondents, respectively, knew nothing about the given term's meaning; "sustainable growth" fared slightly better in terms of the respondents' knowledge of it and much better in terms of their emotional responses (STEM 2023: 15–16). Czechs are also found to be more worried about local nature protection than the planetary level, but neither topic is of primary concern to them (IBID.: 4).

Regime

A regime is a cluster of practices, infrastructures and incumbent stakeholders intertwined in a hegemonic power-structure. This chapter starts by looking at historical and institutional developments of the Czech state and then moves on to the current policies and alliances. Past developments are then contextualized by the current economic performance and the regime's stance of green transition.

Despite their different starting positions after the fall of socialism and their shared ambition to build national capitalism, the four Visegrad countries eventually converged on "foreign-led capitalist models" (BOHLE – GRESKOVIC 2012: 140–146). The Czech Republic had an especially strong starting position with its small and stable debt but this paradoxically led to its weaker integration into international financial frameworks. Together with the coupon privatisation program prolonging the state ownership of the economy via banks, this led to "distorted industrial-financial relations" (IBID.: 145).

The quick decline of domestic heavy industry and the replacement of national capitalism by the dependence on foreign capital brought about a rise of comprador elites. Their interests were closely tied to the attractiveness of the country for foreign investors, and in the 2000's there was a vision of the Czech Republic as a competition state that was shared across

the political spectrum (DRAHOKOUPIL 2008: 365). This meant attracting foreign direct investments primarily through investment subsidies, tax breaks, and infrastructure investments.

Bohle and Greskovic (2012) identify some common factors among the Visegrad countries. These are weak corporatist relations, a limited inclusion of labour into decision-making, and a peculiar combination of aggressive pro-market policies and welfare states, especially with regard to pensions. A systematic representation of various groups in the political process gave way to an ad hoc top-down assignment of benefits to strategically important groups. Another common feature that can be traced way back to the early 20th century, is the rivalry among the Visegrad countries hampering their cooperation, with the exception of specific moments of truce like when the EU accession was conditioned on their cooperation (IBID.: 164).

Krpec and Hodulák (2019: 2) then ask why the long-term dedication of Czech policies to liberal economic recipes has not resulted in a faster convergence with Western Europe. They show that the pro-export character of the Czech economy in fact largely consists in within-firm transfers, resulting in a blowing up of the data on exports but also on value-added that in fact happens elsewhere. Their answer to the riddle of the lack of convergence lies in the semi-peripheral or dependent character of the Czech economy, as even among other Central European states, it is extreme in its *"excessive dependence on foreign investments, control of the private sector by foreign owners, and weak national socio-economic structures"* (IBID.: 21).

Krpec and Hodulák (2019) point to the Czech Republic's limited ability to outgrow its semi-peripheral position due to i) outflow of profits, ii) a lack of national projects of shared interest between the state and capital owners, and iii) a lack of opportunities to focus on non-price competitiveness due to the subsidiary role. A related question then is whether green competitiveness as conceived especially in Western Europe (AMBEC 2017) could serve as a Czech domestic convergence project or whether it would be doomed precisely due to these characteristics.

The Czech Republic is among the most industrial EU countries by share of GDP and has a relatively high emission intensity of GDP (MŽP 2021).

This is due to its industry structure and the historically cheap energy produced from its abundant coal. The cost-competitiveness and high energy intensity combine into a powerful lock-in that is difficult to address. The market-driven sustainability transition and green competitiveness both rely on robust, technology-neutral regulations, R&D investments, and proactive planning that helps coordinate commercial stakeholders in efforts to reach agreed targets (NEVER – KEMP 2017; AMBEC 2017; PORTER – VAN DEN LINDE 1995). This runs contrary to the neoliberal approach historically embedded in Czech economic policies and is also more difficult to do with the country's weak administrative capacities and lack of traditions of a coordinated economy. According to the European Semester, the Czech Republic is failing in all these areas. It utilises a limited number of environmental taxes, continues to provide subsidies for fossil fuels and polluting practices in agriculture, lacks a framework for incentivising investments in energy efficiency and underfinances the circular economy and environmental protection as the added revenue from emission permits was dissolved in the general budget rather than earmarked for transition (EC 2023A: 33–35). Furthermore, transition-related goals originate from the European level and lack implementation plans and impact assessments (EC 2023B).

Hojnik, Prokop and Stejskal (2022) analyse data from Czech and Slovenian firms and show environmental regulation in those countries to be connected to the environmental performance of firms but do not confirm a connection between regulation and firms' R&D investments. They interpret it as a refutation of the weak version of the Porter hypothesis which states that environmental regulation spurs private innovations (IBID.: 155). Nonetheless, in the light of Krpec and Hodulák's (2019: 3) findings, it seems to be rather a result of the specific position of CEE's firms within the global value chains because there, *"investment into research and development is significantly lower than in the core, and usually reserved to improving the cost efficiency of known tasks using existing capital"*. The promise of a hi-tech green economy is then difficult to fulfil.

Interestingly, green transition is hardly a topic in the Czech political discussion, as indicated by, among other things, the low familiarity with its key concepts among the public. In January 2024, the National Economic Council, an advisory body of the government, produced a working paper of pro-growth policy proposals. Among its 37 recommendations, green

transition only appears indirectly in the 35th, and it is discussed mostly in connection with facilitating the influx of EU funds into green investments (NERV 2024: 39). Economic advisors to the government here do not seem to consider green growth to be of any relevance for the Czech Republic.

Braun (2020: 1118) argues that the negative perception of EU climate policies in the Czech Republic largely has to do with the country's socialisation among the other V4 countries and the countries' converging views of climate policies as a threat to the economy. Negotiating compensation mechanisms in the V4 coalition could be seen as a new moment of truce among the old rivals (BOHLE – GRESKOVIC 2012), as it creates a shared discourse of resistance to more ambitious goals in the Eastern semi-periphery.

Niches

Hess (2014) shows that the political struggles around the green transition bring together stakeholders from various industries. It could typically be both niche and regime actors from other sectors (hi-tech, finance, insurance) that may not have a direct interest in climate but support the niche for strategic reasons. Hess (IBID.) calls them "countervailing industrial power" and they are a part of a sustainable constituency.

No such stakeholders appeared in the public discussion until the mid-2010's, when the data of Ocelík et al. (2019) were collected. The sustainable constituency did not emerge from the solar boom because of its policy design. Due to a small time window, high capital requirements and no limits on size, most of the new market was captured by existing incumbents or foreign investors with a weaker lobbying power and lower levels of trust among the public (GÜRTLER – POSTPISCHIL – QUITZOW 2019). The countervailing industrial power did emerge later but remains small and will be discussed below.

Geels et al. (2016: 898) discuss the possibility of regime actors gradually transforming to a more sustainable model. This could be a reaction to a changed socio-economic environment but also a result of the agency of employees and management. Geels et al. (IBID.: 899) propose a sequence of i) a local search and small adjustments in routines, ii) exploring new technologies or processes, and iii) transforming models, the mission and identity.

The ESG rating compiled by the Association of Social Responsibility provides a good opportunity to assess this process among the biggest and best established firms as it can be considered as being awarded to incumbents at the forefront of sustainability efforts. It was awarded based on reporting and goals along the ESG categories that correspond to small adjustments in functioning that are unrelated to business models (ASO 2023). While in the long run, ESG reports could trigger deeper changes, currently they correspond at most to the first stage of incumbents' transformation.

A prospective countervailing industrial power was formed recently. In November 2023, some of the big players attempted a new spin on the sustainability vs. status quo debate and founded the Alliance for an Emission-Free Future. In the opening event, they said that the Green Deal needs to be stripped of ideology and that the decarbonisation debate should be kept strictly technical and financial (CAFOUREK 2023), which could be interpreted as a compromise between green growth and the status quo in the categories utilised here. A backlash came from both sides – Green Deal opponents and green transition experts, suggesting that there is very little manoeuvring room left between opposing the Green Deal and supporting decarbonisation. It might point back to the fragmentation described by Ocelík et al. (2019), where such a middle ground is difficult to build.

Green growth and green competitiveness both remain niche concepts in the Czech Republic. Perhaps the most established player to start embracing them is the Confederation of Industry, which provides a whole website on green transition, the available tools, and good practice examples (ZT N.D.). Although not quite an advocacy project, the website keeps up a neutral to positive framing of the green transition as a trend that is coming and that firms should prepare for.

A more positive stance is taken by two other firm coalitions: Change for the Better (ZKL N.D.) and the Modern Energy Union (ME N.D.). While relatively small within the Czech context, these initiatives utilise the eco-modernist framing of sustainability innovations and their potential for economic growth and green competitiveness. They connect innovative, high-tech firms (especially in the field of energy) and more service-oriented corporate players with a stronger commitment to sustainability. Apart from providing a common platform and sharing good practice among

members, both formations are openly building up political momentum for speeding up the transition.

Another currently forming business initiative in this regard is Doughnut Czechia, which organised its first conference in November 2023. While explicitly including approaches like ESG, it is named after and framed by Kate Raworth's post-growth concept of Doughnut economics. The platform aims to facilitate networking and good practice in service design across institutions, firms and the non-profit sector (PÁBENÍ 2023).

Within the sustainable business environment, there is also a formation more focused on economic democracy and post-growth entrepreneurship that was set up around the publishing house PeopleComm. It publishes Czech translations of degrowth authors and literature on non-hierarchical organisations and individual transformation, and engages in a systemic critique of global capitalism. Unlike in the green growth coalitions, there is no advocacy structure in this group, and the group has limited political impact, but there is a growing constituency of business people exposed to some of the sustainability thinking around it.

Degrowth itself is then mostly established in the climate movement and NGOs focused on just transition, extractivism, global and local inequalities, education, housing and energy poverty.[2] And although it is based on inspiration from foreign sources (from both the global North and South), the niche is more lively in the application of the theory, localised experiments and international networking with partner movements. The degrowth bottom-up, pluriversal logic also prevents domestic practitioners from simply replicating foreign models and "catching up" with "more advanced" locales – the movement inevitably has to look for place- and context-specific solutions (PUNGAS ET AL. 2024). Apart from "the Green Deal without ideology", these are perhaps the only sustainability practices being developed locally.

Within academia, social science research on green growth and green transition remains a fringe phenomenon. The situation is barely better for degrowth. Perhaps an exception to both cases is Masaryk University in Brno, which houses much of the above cited research and also serves as a degrowth niche that has, over the years, produced an ample record of

domestic grassroots movements and initiatives that captures their common features and potential alliances but also their richness that cannot be enveloped within a single label (JOHANISOVÁ – CRABTREE – FRAŇKOVÁ 2013; FRAŇKOVÁ – CATTANEO 2018).

An academic/activist niche of its own is research based on philosophy, decolonial studies, resilience, anthropology, design and art that studies the deeper root causes of unsustainability and stimulates a radical imagination of how they could be addressed (STÖCKELOVÁ – SENFT – KOLÁŘOVÁ 2023; KOUBOVÁ – BARONOVÁ 2023; PELOUŠKOVÁ – ZBIEJCZUK SUCHÁ – NOVOTNÝ 2022; BARŠA 2015). It clearly deserves a mention here because it constitutes a majority of Czech academic and artistic reflections on sustainability, again place-specific and original, but it cannot be assigned to either green growth or degrowth without some discursive violence because it is not primarily concerned with economic policies and discourse. Breaking the simplified dichotomy between green growth and degrowth at this place can serve as a memento to the actual richness of alternative ways of thinking about sustainability that spans the volume of the *pluriversal pathway*.

Vulnerabilities

The historical account of STR demonstrates very convincingly that no regime is ever quite stable and permanent. This must be even more valid in the turbulent times of the climate crisis, wars, and humanitarian disasters. Outlining some existing weaknesses and vulnerabilities here does not lead to specific predictions but it provides model examples of how the transition might ensue.

The above cited European Semester (EC 2023: 31) offers a comparison-based vulnerability assessment of the EU members, and its assessment of the Czech Republic is as follows: *"Czechia has medium-high vulnerabilities related to 'inequalities and the social impact of the transitions' and 'value chains and trade'. It also shows higher vulnerabilities compared to the rest of the EU in the areas 'cybersecurity' (mainly due to ICT security incidents in enterprises) and 'financial globalisation.'"*

Bohle and Eihmanis (2022) found four structural vulnerabilities common to the Visegrad countries: a severe crisis of care, strains in social

solidarity, democratic erosion, and dependent capitalism. This would be very much in line with the Czech literature on structural exclusions and the systemic lack of resilience especially in the internal peripheries (BĚLÍČEK ET AL. 2021; PROKOP 2019).

Finally, the Ministry of Social Affairs conducted a series of foresight workshops aiming at identifying potential systemic risks to the society. The "time bombs" they identified were: income and labour market insecurity; the growing cost of life; impacts of digitalisation on the labour market; impacts of the ageing population; increased occurrence of mental health issues for youth; digital vulnerability, and addictions.

DISCUSSION

Given the institutional background and economic dynamics, there is a very limited space for green growth or green competitiveness policies in the Czech Republic. This is due to a historically entrenched laissez faire approach to the economy (BOHLE – GRESKOVIC 2012), a cost competitiveness lock-in and weak national socio-economic structures (KRPEC – HODULÁK 2019), a division among experts and knowledge production networks (OCELÍK ET AL. 2019), and a disconnect between environmental regulation and private R&D investments (HOJNIK – PROKOP – STEJSKAL 2022). It follows that sustainability measures are mainly entering the economy from the outside, often in a top-down manner. This is the case with EU taxes, regulations, or mandatory goals on decarbonisation, but also with internal standards in foreign companies driving their organisational transformation.

The niche of green growth is largely dependent on alliances with regime actors but also aims to build its own constituency (especially in the field of clean energy) and a countervailing industrial power (finance, consultancies, and even automotive incumbents involved in the niche coalitions). This is done based on a promise of an external trend that is eventually arriving, and many measures are implemented in expectation of the coming regulation or transformed business norms. In this regard, eco-modernisation fits very well into the older catch-up development narrative because it aims to copy a Western trend and ride it towards convergence.

Reasons for doubt, however, lie in the very core of the green competitiveness idea. It consists in seizing the first-mover advantage and relies on product differentiation and proactive market shaping (AMBEC 2017). This is very difficult to do while following the track of others from a semi-peripheral, dependent position, and without localised know-how and cooperation networks spanning across industry, academia, and institutions. Furthermore, Braun (2020: 1117) argues that it is no coincidence that the ecological modernisation narrative is not so appealing in the relatively poorer CEE countries because the vision of modernisation that transcends current conflicts is more distant here than in the richer or "more developed" Western Europe.

And this opens the question of the political economy of a green growth transition. Incumbents do not seem to hope for gains from a speedy transition, but neither is there a strong enough niche that would maintain the speed at least at the level of the rest of the EU. Workers are not mobilising for faster transition policies either, and the impacts on them are expected to be mixed at best under the current circumstances (ČERNÝ ET AL. 2023). In this situation, green growth is unlikely to win support for a fast transformation and has to rely on slow changes coming from external influences. This would constitute the transformed capitalism pathway, here consisting of a gradual top-down policy tightening and an eventual reorientation of the incumbent firms themselves along the lines proposed by Geels et al. (2016).

If the capitalist regime was largely successful in narratively framing the green transition as a threat (ČERNÝ – OCELÍK 2020; BRAUN 2020), it poses an obstacle for degrowth just as well as green growth. Given the stability of some institutional features of Czech capitalism, degrowth has to rely on ruptural developments, typically shocks coming from the landscape level. Given all the discussed vulnerabilities that seem to be stemming directly from the nature of the current socio-political regime, it would appear unlikely that it can survive for long without changes. But neither is it already collapsing, so the patchwork manner of combinations will probably have to work specifically with the cracks and ridges of the current regime if it is to grow on its side.

A recommendable course of action would be finding measures perceived as symbiotic by the two sustainability niches and applying them in

a manner that would tackle the structural vulnerabilities of the society. Based on figure 2 this could mean an improved public participation in transition plans, community energy or energy savings designed as countermeasures against energy poverty. In other words, it means addressing environmental issues together with social ones, and addressing inequalities in a more reliable way than green growth itself. This generally means an emphasis on social innovations and political coalitions across niche contexts countering the problem of niche isolation (HANSEN ET AL. 2018) and offering opportunities to *scale out* and *scale deep* (VAN DEN BOSCH – ROTMANS 2008).

It is quite common to imagine a degrowth shift through a gradual development of green growth that would slowly enable more radical sustainability measures to take root (GIBBS – O'NEIL 2018: 304–306). This assumption stems from some of the core elements of STR models, which describe reinforcing feedback loops of new political and social institutions as they gradually get entrenched and evolve towards more transformative changes. It is in line with the models of deep transitions (SCHOT – KANGER 2018) and societal tipping points (LENTON ET AL. 2022) and it can be tracked in some future projections of the European Environment Agency (ASQUITH – SPECK 2021: 39–49). But such a linear development is arguably relevant especially for Western European core countries with already highly developed green growth niches and it is by no means the only one possible. The limited entrenchment of ecomodernist approaches in the Czech Republic can be seen as an opportunity to shuffle the sequence, experiment with a different order, and perhaps later return to some ecomodernist innovations that prove successful elsewhere.

And this is precisely what Vandeventer, Cattaneo and Zografos (2019) mean by a *pluriversal pathway*. Rather than a hegemony of "pure degrowth", it opens up a way for a mixture of various innovations prioritising pragmatic applications of place-specific solutions and addressing contingent political situations before ideological consistency. If there is a new overarching paradigm emerging, as suggested by the deep transition concept, it will only reveal its inner consistency ex-post, not during the transition period when various logics need to be combined in an ad-hoc, patchwork manner.

It should be noted that the simplified model discussed here omits nationalist and authoritarian approaches to sustainability as an autonomous niche that they in fact constitute. In the Czech Republic, they remain

very weak for the time being, as shown, on one hand, by the failure of "decarbonisation stripped of ideology" to inspire conservative support, and, on the other hand, by the unconvincing presence, or indeed, tokenisation, of sustainability in the proposals of the illiberal left (DRULÁK ET AL. 2021). Eco-fascist and eco-authoritarian innovations are nonetheless being developed abroad and may find their way into Czech politics, very likely benefitting from potential ruptures and landscape-level shocks (BOHLE ET AL. 2022).

CONCLUSION

The Czech case proves unique in its many institutional, economic, and political characteristics. It therefore offers an instructive case for imagining sustainability transition outside the established frames. This paper aimed to contribute to the literature on degrowth as a niche innovation within STR. It did so by combining insights from existing STR applications in the Czech Republic with a wider framing of the national institutional background. Based on these inputs, it outlined some possible developments, including recommendations for action for the degrowth stakeholders.

Further research is needed in how precisely the coalitions between green growth, degrowth, and the regime work and what it means for specific mobilisations or policy proposals. Given the many existing comparisons of the V4 and CEE states, one focused specifically on degrowth strategies and agendas in these countries would very well fit the literature and might prove extremely useful for studying degrowth in semi-peripheral contexts.

ENDNOTES

1 The disadvantage of combining all sectors of the economy together is losing sensitivity to inter-sectoral struggles. E.g. mandatory ESG reporting reinforces the regime of consultancies, creating a significant new market for their services, but on the other hand it threatens the fossil energy regime because all firms would then have an incentive to buy renewable power. Inter-sectoral power and interest dynamics are discussed below in the empirical analysis.

2 A support for degrowth is openly avowed by the organisations Hnutí Duha (Friends of the Earth), NaZemi, Re-set, Limity jsme my, Fridays for Future, Univerzity za klima, and Iniciativa nájemnic a nájemníků; a part of the community housing movement and some local agriculture initiatives.

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NOTE

The article benefited from the critical feedback provided by the two anonymous reviewers, who helped me to narrow down the focus of the text, restructure the arguments and include some additional relevant literature.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ondřej Kolínský is a green transition researcher at the Czech Technical University and the Association for International Affairs. He focuses on the overlap between innovation, regional and green transition policies.

Book Review

Jakub Eberle, Jan Daniel: Politics of Hybrid Warfare: The Remaking of Security in Czechia after 2014

CHAM: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2023, 229 PAGES, ISBN 978-3-031-32702-5

CHIARA LIBISELLER	Leiden University, Netherlands
E-MAIL	c.libiseller@hum.leidenuniv.nl
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5775-9630

DOI https://doi.org./10.32422/cjir.910

If the other is seen as a "Russian fifth column", uneducated "patryot" or a mere "cockroach", there is little space to take their grievances seriously and accept them as legitimate subjects of a political conversation (p. 208).

The central argument of this book is that the concept of 'hybrid warfare' (HW) is not only ill-suited to address the threat posed by Russia, but also introduces the logics of geopolitics and war into unrelated societal debates, polarising society and making democratic consensus more difficult to achieve. The book is highly normative and personal. The authors are themselves part of the phenomenon they are analysing – they are based at the Institute of International Relations Prague, and they have previously intervened in both the academic and Czech public debates on HW (DANIEL – EBERLE 2018, 2022; EBERLE – DANIEL 2021).[1] Worried about the state of democratic debates in Czechia, Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel aim *"to disrupt the normality of the HW discourse in Czechia and beyond"* (p. 3), decouple societal debates from geopolitical tensions, and create space for different ways to deal with challenges in Czech society.

Plenty of criticism has already been voiced against the concept of HW over the past years, most of which has focused on its lack of conceptual clarity or inadequateness to capture Russian actions and interests (ESPECIALLY RENZ 2016; LIBISELLER 2023; FRIDMAN 2018; STOKER – WHITESIDE 2020). But discourses have power and serve interests; vagueness can be productive. For example, the impact of another prominent security discourse, the 'war on terror', is well established: especially in the United States, it has led to a 'forever war' in which remote warfare and targeted killing have been normalised internationally, and torture, racial profiling, heightened security measures and extended war powers internally. Yet, few studies have looked at the productive power of the HW discourse (AN IMPORTANT EXCEPTION IS MÄLKSOO 2018). Eberle and Daniel's book fills this gap.

Before engaging with the contents of the book, a short primer on the HW concept is necessary. The concept was originally developed in the United States around 2007, when it referred to the blending of several modes of war on the operational level, including *"conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate*

violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (HOFFMAN 2007: 14). The concept became known to a broad, non-military audience only when NATO, the EU, and some of their member states started using the term to characterise Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In the following years, the term was broadened and soon used primarily to refer to disinformation. In the same step, it was detached from Ukraine and applied to Russian behaviour towards Europe and the West more generally. Conceptual clarity was sacrificed for the concept's utility as a marketing device to attract attention to Russia's revived assertiveness and mobilise states' resources (CALISKAN – LIEGÉOIS 2021; LIBISELLER 2023).

In their book, Eberle and Daniel trace the HW discourse in Czechia from 2014 onwards, showing that several HW narratives now co-exist there. The shared assumption of these narratives is that Russia is shaping public opinion and influencing election results through disinformation campaigns and support to local actors. It is thus supposedly Russia that is behind the societal polarisation, democratic decline, and decreasing trust in political institutions. Eberle and Daniel challenge this assumption, arguing that deeming the clash of differing views as part of an external influence campaign means that these views are not taken seriously and actual flaws in democratic processes remain invisible and unaddressed. This argument is expressed most clearly in the introduction of the book, which provides an excellent outline of why the authors believe HW to be ill-suited to characterise Russian activities in Czechia and how the HW discourse has negatively affected debates on issues that are arguably not related to Russia. It is a very powerful and accessible summary of the main arguments of the book that is relevant far beyond Czechia, which is why I would recommend it as required reading for any course on HW. The remainder of the book investigates different aspects of the HW discourse in Czechia – its context, promoters, and content – and is structured as a 'series of interventions' rather than a comprehensive narrative on the development of the discourse. Each chapter leverages different concepts from International Political Sociology, Critical Security Studies and Critical Geopolitics to open up a different lens on this discourse. This approach is both a strength and a weakness of the book – it offers an interdisciplinary engagement with the topic, but sometimes lacks depth.

In terms of *context* (Chapter 2), Eberle and Daniel identify several political and economic crises that hit Czechia between 2008 and 2013. Consequently, Czech society found itself trapped in a dual liminality – between 'East' and 'West' and between war and peace – making it difficult to define its place in the world and its relationships with others, and thus to establish what the academic literature calls 'ontological security'. The HW discourse offered a solution to this liminality. Through the geopoliticisation and *'warification'* (pp. 17–18) of societal debates, it provided an opportunity to redefine Czechia's position in the world: it now saw itself as a defender of European values engaged in a war with Russia, which aims to challenge Czechia's rapprochement with the West.

To analyse the *promoters* of the HW discourse (Chapters 3 and 4), the authors leverage the concept of 'assemblage', arguing that various actors temporarily attached themselves to the HW discourse. From 2014 to 2021, a network of think tanks, government institutions, NGOs, and journalists helped diffuse and institutionalise the HW discourse and, in turn, benefitted from this institutionalisation. HW was put on top of the Czech security agenda and institutionalised in ministries, the parliament, and the armed forces. More funding to tackle HW became available, allowing established organisations to grow and new actors to emerge. The authors' effort to link the rise of the HW discourse to the actions of groups and individuals successfully challenges the objectivity of the Russian HW threat and denaturalises the HW discourse – its adoption for national security strategies was not predetermined but is the outcome of various contingencies and active promotion.

In terms of *content* (Chapters 5 and 6), Eberle and Daniel identify three different narratives on HW – a 'defence narrative', a 'counterinfluence narrative', and an 'education narrative'. Each narrative rests on a different set of expertise and tells a different story about where the threat comes from, what is threatened, and what the response should look like. The authors' discussion not only shows the variety and vagueness inherent in the HW discourse, but also raises important questions about how expertise is formed and established: When a new topic arises, who is considered an expert and why? What counts as relevant knowledge? How do 'experts' claim knowledge and when are such claims successful?

The authors' challenge to the HW discourse serves to open up space for different approaches to democratic politics. The conclusion, therefore, mobilises liminality productively to challenge existing dichotomies. Building on the works of Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe, Eberle and Daniel suggest ways to think differently about vulnerabilities and democratic conflict. This chapter is much more than a conclusion – it seems like the argument that the authors wanted to make all along.

In sum, the authors' normative and personal analysis provides a powerful argument for dropping the HW discourse. At the same time, however, their embeddedness made them miss similar dynamics beyond Czechia. Indeed, much of what the authors outline – the fact that the HW concept has militarised and Russified, and thus externalised, current challenges in liberal democracies; the practice of dividing people, political parties, and even seemingly unrelated viewpoints into pro- and anti-Russian ones; the use of this practice as political tool; as well as the existence of different narratives around the single term – can be observed in a number of other European countries (JANIČATOVÁ – MLEJNKOVÁ 2021; LJUNGKVIST 2024). Moreover, in contrast to the authors' claim to *"a local version [of HW] that was increasingly diverging from NATO's military focus"* (p. 88), the debates in Czechia actually seem to be similar to what we witnessed on the international stage – the definition of HW in the National Security Audit report, for example, is very similar to NATO's definition. And both the NATO and Czech discourses seem to differ from official definitions of HW, as they move HW much more into the realm of non-military means and broaden their focus from Russia to China.

To be sure, linking the rise of the HW discourse to local discourses and dynamics offers an insightful account of why the HW discourse resonated in Czechia. On the other hand, these similarities across states challenge Eberle and Daniel's explanation of the rise of the HW discourse being based on Czechia's dual liminality – between East and West and between war and peace. The former they consider as a national or potentially Central and Eastern European feature that, by implication, cannot explain the rise of the HW discourse in, say, Great Britain or Sweden. The latter, according to them, is *"a general global condition [...] in which war and peace are increasingly blurred"* (p. 30). Unfortunately, this claim is established only through references to general literature which Eberle and Daniel buy into

too readily without offering evidence from the Czech case. However, as I have argued elsewhere (LIBISELLER – MILEVSKI 2021), even though the categories of war and peace are a Western invention and somewhat arbitrary, it is still possible and relevant to uphold this distinction – for the very reasons that Eberle and Daniel challenge the HW discourse: accepting the claim that we cannot distinguish between war and peace anymore simply weakens our own conceptual, legal, and democratic frameworks. It makes *warification* possible in the first place. Therefore, rather than accepting the 'grey zone' discourse, it needs to be denaturalised just like the HW discourse. If our distinction between war and peace is artificial, there can also not be an objective claim to the blurring of war and peace. This blurring, I would argue in contrast to the authors, is the effect of the HW and 'grey zone' discourses, not a permissive condition for their rise.

If the supposed dual liminality can only partially explain the rise of the HW discourse (beyond Czechia and Central and Eastern Europe), then what can fully explain it? One potentially underexplored factor in this book is the power of the HW discourse. Eberle and Daniel point out that the HW discourse rose in Czechia because it was able to provide a societal function. Yet, I would argue that the benefits of the HW discourse for its promotors went further than that. On the international and different national levels, we see that the power inherent in the HW label after its adoption by NATO and the EU encouraged many actors to hop on the HW bandwagon, but do so with different understandings of HW based on their own contexts and interests (LIBISELLER 2023). The power of the HW concept came with material benefits (such as research funding), while the vagueness of the concept allowed for flexible adaptation. The different HW narratives that Eberle and Daniel identified likely emerged from different interests for which the HW label is leveraged. By treating the Czech discourse more or less within a vacuum, Eberle and Daniel underestimate the interplay between the national and international HW discourses as well as that between HW and other militarising concepts (such as cognitive warfare). In this regard, the international dimension of the assemblage would have been an interesting aspect to explore in more detail. Eberle and Daniel point to the assemblage's international links but assume that the assemblage emerged in Czechia and then became internationalised. Moreover, engaging with the actors and the HW narratives in separate chapters means that the two are often disconnected and the underlying interests underexplored;

arguably, to understand the relations and dynamics of the assemblage, an investigation of their discourses is necessary; similarly, for understanding the evolution of the three different narratives, a connection to the actors behind them and their (institutional) interests is vital.

Focusing on the power inherent in the HW discourse could have also helped to mobilise the full potential of the concept of assemblage to explore the relations of the Czech HW assemblage in more detail. How do assemblage members relate to each other? What are their past and current, formal and informal connections? How do they shape each other's knowledge and points of view? Did any actors aim to become part of the assemblage but fail? Did any actor exit the assemblage during the years under investigation? The failure to fully mobilise the concept might be due to the authors' *"creative appropriation"* (p. 61) of it; rather than making a theoretical contribution, their purpose is to leverage theoretical concepts to explain empirical phenomena. These concepts are, therefore, only outlined as far as is necessary to apply them to the case. Indeed, the authors show a very good grasp of the academic literature and must be applauded for their clear writing style that summarises complex concepts in an accessible manner. The debates in the literature, nuances, and limitations of the concepts are not engaged with, however. This is problematic because 'ontological security' and 'assemblage' have been used so much in International Relations in the past few years that their boundaries and meanings have become blurred. Like the HW concept, these theoretical concepts thereby spread further, and became vague and more powerful, encouraging even more scholars to adopt them. In the book at hand, the application of both 'ontological security' and 'assemblage' remains somewhat superficial, not fully engaging with the performative aspects of the former and the relational aspects of the latter. To be fair, this is a common issue in these literatures (E.G. BROWNING – JOENNIEMI 2017) and does not necessarily hamper the authors' argument. It just ironically produces an issue of the HW concept and makes unclear to the reader why the authors have chosen these concepts over others.[2]

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Through its critical interrogation of the emergence and consequences of the HW discourse, this book offers an important contribution to (Critical)

Security Studies, Critical Geopolitics, and Strategic Studies. Especially the latter field would greatly benefit from a critical reflection on the concepts it produces and the unintended effects they may have. This book is also relevant to all those worried about democratic decline, which, throughout Europe, in one way or another, has been linked to Russian interference. Thereby, Russia's power through and control over disinformation and cyber campaigns have been heavily exaggerated, and Europe has been portrayed as a passive victim. Eberle and Daniel's book is a powerful call to move away from those Russia-centred narratives and reclaim agency to improve democratic and societal strength.

ENDNOTES

1 Some chapters of the book are based on those earlier interventions.

2 The authors further develop the role of ontological security and anxiety in the HW discourse in Czechia in Eberle and Daniel (2022).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chiara Libiseller is a lecturer at Leiden University, the Netherlands, and a deputy editor of the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Her research investigates contemporary Western ideas and practices of war and warfare, and combines studies on strategic theory; the changing character of war; knowledge production on war; discourses and ideas about war; and civil-military relations. She received her PhD from the War Studies Department, King's College London, with a thesis on *The rise and fall of fashionable concepts in Strategic Studies*.

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