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Introduction: Uses of ‘the East’ in International Studies: Provincialising IR from Central and Eastern Europe

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Criticism of International Relations (IR) as an ‘American’ (Hoffmann 1977), ‘transatlantic’ (Johnston 2012), ‘Eurocentric’ (Hobson 2012; Bilgin 2016) or ‘Western-centric’ (Acharya and Buzan 2007; cf. Alejandro 2018) discipline abounds, along with the calls for provincialising IR (Vasilaki 2012) by making it a truly global intellectual venture (Acharya 2014, 2016). Ironically, yet oddly resonating with the general insignificance of the Central and East European region (CEE) in the traditional structural IR theorising, CEE as a possible point of departure for ‘de-parochialising’ the field has yet to make its appearance in this debate. For instance, Arlene Tickner’s (2013) nuanced discussion of the centre-periphery configuration of IR does not mention CEE among the sites of IR ‘peripheral knowledge’. Yet by most of the modern metrics of our field, CEE could hardly be counted as part of the disciplinary ‘core’ either: scholarship from CEE academic institutions remains underrepresented in leading IR journals, with matching unevenness in the editorial boards of influential journals and prestigious grant capture by scholars with CEE affiliations.¹

Notwithstanding these notable structural and material inequalities, an invitation to zoom in on CEE understandings about and scholarship on ‘the international’ would hardly strike many as a particularly bold normative move in making the study of world politics less

Eurocentric. If anything, Central and East Europeans appear as ardent disciples of the West: as adopters or crafty mimics rather than intellectual contestants of Western norms and teachings throughout the post-Cold War period. For its common subsuming under the (effectively Western) European epistemological paradigm in the study of world politics, the CEE region does not appear as a primary candidate for advancing ‘post-Western IR’: its difference vis-à-vis the IR mainstream is too minor compared to the voices emerging from the post-colonial Global South, while its experience with colonialism and imperialism too distinct from that of the Global South to be an organic ally in the debates on decolonising knowledge production in IR. The complex in-betweenness of CEE as ‘almost the same but not quite’ Other of Europe in the historical practice and contemporary study of domination, subordination, colonisation and decolonisation make the region an intellectually animating challenge for developing a global IR in post-Western terms (cf. Acharya 2016: 14; Bhabha 1994: 122).

Set against the unfolding scholarly conversations on globalising, provincialising, and/or decolonising IR, this special issue makes a twofold contribution. Our first aim is to take stock of the uses of ‘the East’ in the scholarship of politics and international relations in order to account for the relative silence about CEE in the debates on ‘worlding IR’ (cf. Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012, 2013).² With recent concerns about Eastern European democracies ‘going South’ (Müller 2014), time is ripe for an inversed sequel of the original International Relations (IR) in Central and Eastern Europe Forum, published in this journal in 2009 (Drulák 2009; Roter 2009; see also Drulák et al. 2009; Czaputowicz and Wojciuk 2016). Our second objective is to explore what provincialising the discipline from CEE might look like. What is to be done if we want to go ‘beyond sending postcards from “exotic” IR communities around the world, or telling heroic narratives about the achievements of the non-US communities’ in our endeavour to make IR a more global field of study (Bueger 2012: 99)?

Correspondingly, the contributions of the special issue provide a starter for probing a broader set of closely related questions which define the agenda for problematising, pluralising and de-centring *the international* in IR from CEE:

First: What has been the specific role of the CEE region for IR theory-building? In which major areas of international theory has CEE served as a source of historical illustrations, an example of particular conduct or subjectivity, providing a reference point or context to a specific conceptual debate? What kind of political work have CEE area studies done for IR theory, the organisation of and knowledge production on Eastern Europe's role in international politics in general? Have IR scholars from CEE served mostly as informants of 'native' data for 'big theory' authored predominantly by Western scholars, or have they contributed to IR theoretical debates with original concepts and theories in their own right? What has been the ideational agency of CEE region, scholarship and the pertinent area studies in IR (cf. Acharya 2014)? In which ways can we still talk about CEE as a periphery in IR knowledge production? What is the analytical economy behind the CEE marginality in the International Studies debates – and what could be the imagined research strategy out of the current predicament?

Second: How can we provincialise IR from CEE? Can the CEE International Studies scholar speak, where does (s)he do this speaking, and what do they say? (cf. Bilgin 2017, 2018). How have CEE area studies and CEE scholars influenced the intellectual debate and theories of IR? Who publishes what and where? Does the CEE offer a fresh voice from the periphery for the debates of IR and its subfields? Is CEE's relative silence in IR a case of not being heard in the field or rather one of being constantly spoken for and relegated in the position of an object of security politics and theories (i.e. 'always already being securitized'; Bertrand 2018: 281), rather than that of a self-sustained interlocutor and a competent subject in respective academic debates and policy-making? Put in more normative terms, what would a CEE variation on the so-called 'Melian IR' look like (cf. Barkawi and Laffey 2006)?

The contributions of this special issue will explore the twofold problematics of the existing place of CEE in the field of International Studies and what to do about it in relation to some of the core concepts of IR, such as hegemony, the distribution and modes of power (both in the international system and the academic field of IR), political identity, historical memory, and intervention. Combining bibliometric, historical, ethnographic and discourse analytic methods with the participants' 'deep hanging' in the fields of IR and CEE area studies, this special issue is both an empirical stock-taking exercise of the disciplinary traffic patterns between the CEE area studies and IR theoretical debates, and a critical attempt at theorising the interaction between these discrete academic fields of study and research.

We proceed from an observation that peripheral responses to structures and practices of dominance participate in shaping the consequences and nature of that dominance (Goh 2019: 403). Meanwhile, the material inequality in the international system tends to be reflected in the ways knowledge is manufactured and reproduced in IR. By engaging the broader question of the political role and work of regions and area studies for IR theorising, we seek to contribute to the disciplinary sociology of IR. The subject of CEE in IR tends to be 'always already discursively constructed from positions outside of itself' (Matin 2011: 360). This matters for International Relations as an analytical field as bracketing the CEE vernacular perspectives off to the pertinent area studies journals hampers IR's understanding of the intra-European political dynamics empirically (by obscuring the role of CEE political actors and scholars in participating and making sense of international politics), methodologically (producing one-sided, i.e. West-centric accounts) and ethically (displaying the still scanty self-reflectiveness of the discipline). Taken together, these tendencies of IR obfuscate the place and effect of CEE in the theory and practice of International Studies broadly conceived.

The special issue pushes the pluralist and particularist calls to arms for moving beyond ‘Western IR’ decidedly in the postcolonial direction, highlighting the asymmetric relations between ‘the West’ and the rest. Both pluralist and particularist ways of making the study of international relations less Eurocentric remain wanting as the simple opening of the IR intellectual space for airing more non-Western perspectives nor the elevation of various local IR schools or cultural particularisms into new universalisms do not yet shatter the existing hierarchies in the discipline (Vasilaki 2012; cf. Sabaratnam 2011). Albeit not identical, postcolonial and post-Western IR share an acknowledgement of the interconnections between actors, institutions, and discourses in different regions, on the one hand, and global hierarchies embedded in the international power asymmetries, on the other (Owen, Heathershaw and Savin 2017: 285). Proceeding from a peculiarly postcolonial perspective of CEE, emblematically situated ‘between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence’ (Chioni Moore 2001: 112; cf. Epstein 2014), we seek to enhance the understanding of the power relations in the disciplinary field of IR between the traditional ‘core’ and its subtle CEE ‘margins’. The CEE’s enduring problem of ‘minor difference’ from the Western ‘core’ has historically impeded the region’s visibility and audibility in the theory, history and practice of international relations. This special issue argues for a novel understanding of how the region’s inhabitants’ experiences of nested liminalities and consequent mimetic patterns of engaging with the international could serve as alternative – and indeed empowering – modes of articulating and practicing subaltern subjectivities in the study of international relations.

The contributions to this special issue probe the problem and potential of CEE in International Relations and the provincialisation attempts of the field from its manifold sub-disciplinary corners. This collection of papers sprang off from the conversations that started at the International Studies Association (ISA) 2019 Annual Convention in Toronto as part of the European International Studies Association (EISA)-sponsored panel on the theme. The first

three papers by Katarzyna Kaczmarek and Stefanie Ortmann, Lucian Ashworth and Maria Mälksoo deconstruct hierarchical relations between IR and area studies, situate Central and Eastern Europe in a historically significant period of international political thought, and dissect the function and agency of the region in International Security Studies as an important subfield of IR, respectively. The opening article of the special issue frames the ensuing conversation by problematising the distinction and hierarchical relation between IR and area studies. Kaczmarek and Ortmann take issue with the theory-empirical research divide underpinning the IR-area studies division of labour, highlighting the broader genealogy of the social sciences at the root of this division. The hierarchical divide between ‘high theory’ and ‘low data’ arguably at play creates specific structural pressures and re-inscribes hierarchies for individual scholars in the field. Zooming in on the experience of researchers from the ‘Global East’, the authors tackle the intersection of epistemic politics and political economy of knowledge production. They do so by critically investigating the disciplinary practices which privilege theorising over in-depth empirical research and offer imaginative solutions out of the current organisation of knowledge production in international studies in their turn.

Ashworth’s paper places the ‘problem named CEE’ in a concrete historical and intellectual context of interwar British international thought. Contrasting the visions of the region as found in the writings of Halford Mackinder, E. H. Carr and Elizabeth Wiskemann, Ashworth illuminates the paradoxical mismatch between these authors’ fascination with and understanding of CEE. While envisioning the future of the region in distinct ways, Mackinder and Carr both concentrated on abstract conceptions of world order, applying their analytical models to potential foreign policy decisions in CEE thereof. Wiskemann’s approach was different since she relied on her detailed knowledge of the region as a springboard for theorising foreign policy and international order more generally. It was her deep study of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism in the Bohemian Historic Provinces that led Wiskemann to specific

recommendations for the region and its foreign policy that were at odds with Carr's. Her eye for fine detail, and a very different style of international relations writing humanized the lived international political experience of CEE, and thus emerged as quite distinct from the clinical abstractions of Mackinder and Carr.

Mälksoo's paper tackles the function and agency of CEE in a cognate field of International Security Studies (ISS). Through a wide-ranging empirical stock-taking of the ways the region has featured as a space, trope, and scholarly origin in the major ISS/IR journals over the past three decades, Mälksoo demonstrates how CEE has been instrumental for the ISS subfield as an exemplary student of the Western theory and practice of IR ('captive minds'). The region has further served as a symbolic space for exercising the civilising mission of the West and testing the related theories (e.g., security community building, democratisation, modernisation, Europeanisation, norm diffusion) in practice. By implication, CEE has functioned as an 'identity crutch' for the mainstream ISS, and served as a warning and a metaphor of Europe's past wrongs, with a more recent foreboding of their looming recurrence, as exemplified by the oft-scolded backsliding of democracy in the region. The treatment of CEE area studies as effectively information boards, and CEE scholars as sources of raw data rather than even disciplinary interlocutors provides an illustration of some of the persistently problematic disciplinary tendencies of IR and ISS: the inclination to consider history as a 'scripture' or predetermined site for timeless empirical 'lessons' removed from their complex particular contexts (cf. Lawson 2010); the instrumentalisation of local knowledge, and the perpetuating hierarchical organisation of what kind of knowledge and whose perspective matter for IR.

The next two papers by Marko Lovec, Katerina Kočí, Zlatko Šabič, and Katarina Kušić zoom into the specific pockets of Europeanisation and intervention literatures in IR and European Studies – that is, the sub-debates which have made the CEE region their central

analytical concern. Lovec, Kočí and Šabič proceed from the assumption that the region of Central Europe has never really rid itself of a semi-peripheral status throughout the entire post-Cold War era. Consequently, they argue that the notion of ‘good pupils’ which prevailed in the socialisation literature in the 1990s/2000s and the trope of ‘badly behaving’ and ‘failed students’ following the rise of populism and Euroscepticism since the late 2000s have oversimplified if not suppressed the diversity of views and positions within the region. The authors take issue with the overly positive slant of the socialisation scholarship, criticising the downplaying of the ramifications of geopolitical change and the consequent multi-speed integration within the EU which have arguably resulted in the emergence of semi-peripheries between the West and the East, thus contributing to the continuation of the historical ‘buffer zone’ tradition of the region. The anti-stigmatisation strategies of Central Europe have thus far arguably but contributed to the maintenance of dominant discourses.

Kušić’s critical engagement with the overrepresented Balkan subjects in intervention literature proceeds from Meera Sabaratnam’s (2017) call to ‘decolonise intervention’ by reconstructing the subjecthood of its targets. Interrogating the limitations of the existing engagements with the Balkan subject in the literature on international intervention, Kušić develops a decolonial approach, locating the Balkan subject within the global matrices of power through its investment in and simultaneous exile from a European identity. From this location, it is possible to not only better understand local circumstances, but to also complicate constitutive concepts of international studies, such as ‘local’ and ‘international,’ and intervention itself. Kušić maintains that provincialising IR from Southeast Europe demands breaking with the use of postcolonial thought as an easy analogy in the region: rather, we need to make sense of the complex difference and rethink the valorisation of distinct types of knowledge in IR.

The next two papers focus on the intricacies of the two ‘local chapters’ of IR. Filip Ejdus and Marko Kovačević trace the evolution of the discipline in the post-Second World War socialist Yugoslavia, mapping its evolution during and after the Cold War and exploring the field’s (dis)continuities with the post-Yugoslavian state-of-the-art. Building on Buzan and Hansen’s sociology of International Security Studies (2009), Ejdus and Kovačević highlight domestic politics, foreign policy, institutionalisation and academic debates as the core drivers of both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav IR, fleshing out the ways the reproduction of academic knowledge has always been connected to respective political practices in the region.

Lamenting ‘the poor correspondence’ between Western IR and Hungarian ‘backyard’ of the pertinent knowledge production, András Schweitzer engages Benjamin Miller’s concept of state-to-nation balance, referring to the extent the political boundaries in a given region reflect the national affiliations of the main groups and their aspirations to establish states, in the historical context of the East-Central European region and the topical theoretical work done therein. Focusing on the resonating oeuvre by István Bibó, Schweitzer discusses this unduly forgotten piece of scholarship as an exemplary case study on the causes of the poor correspondence between Western IR and the regional knowledge production on international conflicts and their resolution.

The special issue concludes with the paper by Dovilė Budrytė who employs memory politics as a possible opening for the CEE region’s speaking to wider concerns of International Studies and thus generating a critically provincialising platform for global IR. For Budrytė, crises can be re-imagined as engines of discourses and events capable of transforming identities and creating new ones. The studies of historical memory and memory politics that are common in area studies could help to rethink the study of crises in International Relations by demonstrating how crises change discourses and yield opportunities for memories to be challenged and defended. By way of illustration, Budrytė’s paper offers a comparative

exploration of memory politics in Ukraine and Lithuania, tracing major discursive changes, and depicting how new hegemonic historical accounts were created during and in the aftermath of the 2013-2014 crisis in Ukraine.

But is the quest for renewing the study of international relations from and for the CEE margins not the essentialisation of the very margins, a rather problematic congealing of the region, obfuscating its internal diversity (cf. Chakrabarty 2000: 16)? Further, similar patterns of disciplinary underrepresentation are also observable in case of the Mediterranean countries – yet without the prominent calls to arms from the region in view. Problematising the geopolitics of knowledge that has contributed to the exclusion of the so-called Global East from notions of globality, Martin Müller (2020) has made a case for strategic essentialism to redeem this liminal epistemic space for social scientific scholarship. The place and voice of this slippery, hard to categorise ‘secondary Europe with secondary colonial difference’ (cf. Tlostanova 2011) could accordingly be reclaimed by ‘band[ing] together a common banner for an emancipatory political project... to articulate political demands vis-à-vis a hegemonic discourse’, such as ‘the right of recognition, the production of what counts as valid knowledge, the freedom from discrimination’ (Müller 2020: 744). Set on a quest to foreground, and ultimately remap, the interstitial CEE space and its distinct theoretical contributions in relation to IR knowledge claims and distortions, this special issue remains agnostic about the emancipatory potential of ‘placing the East right in the middle of the world’ (Müller 2020: 749). The minor difference of the CEE from the disciplinary centre, a historically strong desire for blending in with Europe and notable mimicry in comparison with the voices from the Global South do not lend a particularly radical promise for reshuffling the analytical limitations of IR from the region. Yet, as ‘East of Europe, West of Russia’ (cf. Acharya 2017), CEE’s de-centring potential as a generally deemed ‘neighbouring construct’ remains enticing precisely

for its liminality, not quite this or that-quality which demands a good ear and encourages subtle tune-keeping from an explorer of international relations.

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¹ For instance, only 23 European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grants in the Social Sciences and Humanities research domain have gone to the regionally-affiliated scholars between 2007-2020 (Bulgaria – 1; Czech Republic – 3; Estonia – 4; Hungary – 6; Poland – 5; Romania – 3; Serbia - 1). For comparison, 130 Germany-affiliated, 167 Netherlands-affiliated and 302 UK-affiliated scholars have received individual Starting Grants within this domain during the said time period from the ERC. In the Consolidator Grants category, the overall score for CEE-based scholars was 18 for 2013-2020 (Croatia – 1; Czech Republic – 6; Hungary – 4; Poland – 5; Romania – 2). In the Advanced Grant category, scholars based at CEE universities received 10 grants between 2008-2019 (Bulgaria – 2; Czech Republic – 1; Hungary – 5; Romania – 1; Slovenia – 1). A more detailed breakdown of granted projects, also evidencing some brain drain from the region to the more represented countries among the top ERC recipients, is available at: <https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/project-database>.

² The first of the three opening volumes of the ‘World Beyond the West’-series included chapters on Russian IR and CEE IR by local authors; the second a chapter on Russian perspectives on globalisation (Tsygankov in Tickner and Blaney 2012) and the third a relational take on the case of Rus, 800-1100) (Neumann in Tickner and Blaney 2013). Notable recent contributions in the series on and from the region broadly conceived include Visoka and Musliu (2019) and Kaczmarska (2020).