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Europe, Islam and the Roma: Liberalism and the manufacture of cultural difference

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Abstract

In this article, we direct our critical enquiry at public intellectuals' musings about cultural difference in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (starting in 2015) and the coincidental eruption of 'ethnic tensions' between Roma and non-Roma citizens in Bulgaria. We show how (1) some intellectuals mobilize their position as holders of legitimate knowledge about culture to construct rigid collective identities, despite their professed liberal political beliefs about the ontological primacy of the individual and (2) how they politicize the constructs of culture to arrive at exclusionary, racist 'solutions' to the security problems that Roma and refugees allegedly pose, thereby fuelling and in many ways legitimizing far-right mobilizations. We examine the discourses of a range of experts commenting on clashes between ethnic Bulgarians and Roma, on one hand, and on the so-called 'refugee crisis', on the other. Juxtaposing the scholarly discourses about two different types of 'surplus populations' helps us tease out the malleability of the 'enemy' and the ensuing complex hierarchical organization of these populations according to the logic of economic utility and preconceptions of the distance between a coveted 'Europe' and a threatening 'Islam'.

Keywords

Europe, intellectuals, Islam, refugees, Roma

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In Europe today, mainstream political debate and policy is increasingly replete with a language of xenophobia. Often, however, this xenophobia manifests itself not explicitly but masked behind tropes of ‘cultural difference’. The displacement of ‘race’ has a long history which Lentin (2005) traces back to the post-war attempt of UNESCO and renowned scholars (among them Claude Levi-Strauss) to discard the language of race. They aimed at a formulation of an inclusive, non-racist notion of multiculturalism, which in the end backfired for they replaced ‘race’ with ‘culture’, divorced culture from politics and thus left the new notion of culture open for misappropriation by racists. As part of the well-meaning ‘mainstreaming’ of culture, the ideas of race and racial difference have shed their less savoury biological-scientific pretensions and are presented as part of a more acceptable discourse on ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’. Following these semantic changes, the political life of the idea of race has hardly been affected; instead, those who articulate systematic theories of difference have proliferated, and those to whom these are applied have changed. In this article, we aim our attention at these new problematic articulations of cultural difference from within the Bulgarian liberal intellectual sphere which target Roma and refugees in Europe.

The Roma population in Europe has traditionally occupied a marginal space – from suffering discrimination and disadvantage to outright persecution, enslavement, forced sterilization and extermination at different times (Stauber and Vago, 2007; Taylor, 2014). The work presented here began specifically with observations made of unfolding events following a scuffle between two groups of ethnic Roma and ethnic Bulgarians in the village of Gurmen in Bulgaria in 2015. What started as a neighbours’ dispute over loud music escalated into a local brawl, only to be picked up and framed by mainstream media as an ‘ethnic conflict’ between Bulgarians and Roma. Just days later, the Bulgarian state resorted to its typical response to such events (Kratunkova, 2018) – bulldozing Roma houses reportedly built illegally in the neighbourhood, leaving families homeless. It was also around the same time that hundreds of thousands of migrants mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq sought their way to a life free of war and economic hardship in the European Union. The small numbers of refugees who attempted to enter overland from Turkey into Bulgaria in 2015 became the focus of attention and moral panic from both right-wing and mainstream political, media and intellectual corners.

In this work, we study ‘expert’ analyses of these so-called ‘cultural crises’, which jumbled together the tensions between Roma and non-Roma, on one hand, and the passage of several thousand refugees through the country en route to Western Europe, on the other. Although the two phenomena are seemingly distinct, we argue that the hybrid image constructed by intellectuals of not just a racial but a cultural Other – as an imminent and existential threat – emerges in the intertwining of racist and (neo-) liberal political reasoning, which reactivates and applies, to Syrians and Afghanis, a racializing-culturalizing model that had already been developed vis-à-vis the Roma.

After introducing our methodological approach, we explore examples of discourses about the crises in question, focussing first on the discursive construction of the figure of the Roma-refugee ‘Other’, and then on the consequences of these constructions for the (liberal) Self. Throughout our analysis, we attempt to demonstrate the short-circuit that allows liberal intellectuals to embrace conservative and far-right analytic methodologies, pointing to the presence of an elective affinity between liberal and conservative analytics

of ‘culture’, which aligns these otherwise incompatible positions and engenders a genteel liberal racism. We claim that this elective affinity is key to understanding (and challenging) the mainstreaming of racism and xenophobia today. Our work then illuminates recent examples of identity construction that allow people who are self-avowed ‘liberals’ to maintain, as a starting point of their analysis, certainty in their existence as collective subjects. Contrary to the premises of methodological individualism associated with liberalism, they espouse a belief in collective responsibilities. We argue that what enables this is the recasting of liberalism’s core as cultural, rather than political.

Methodology

Our research was prompted by observations of such short-circuiting between conservative and liberal language in the political commentary on the Roma and the refugee ‘crises’ we saw flooding the Bulgarian public sphere in 2015. We proceeded to more systematically collect a corpus of texts relating to Roma and to refugees published in Bulgarian media in the period 2015–2016. Agreeing with Barker and Galasinski (2001) that cultural studies’ engagement with textual analysis can benefit from the systematic approach that the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) network of methods can offer, we adopted Norman Fairclough’s CDA approach to examining the texts. Making use of CDA’s broad checklist of aspects of language which can be systematically investigated in the data, our methodological objective was to identify relevant semiotic and ‘interdiscursive’ (Fairclough, 2001) features of the texts and link them to relevant broader socio-political practices. Apart from providing us with a more or less structured toolbox for approaching the texts, CDA suited our plan to offer a socially and politically committed critique. Although as a starting point we embrace Cultural Studies’ Derridean focus on the instability of meaning (our project traces the instability of the notion of culture and of liberal identity), we partly agree with Barker and Galasinski’s (2001: 27) judgement that structuralist and poststructuralist legacy has sometimes produced blind spots in Cultural Studies analyses and that a CDA-inspired critique – one that insists on making value and deontic claims – can facilitate a politically potent critical commentary of strong practical use, on issues such as racism. In this, we agree with British Cultural Studies’ Stuart Hall’s (1987) claim that political action is bounded on the arbitrary (‘necessarily fictional’) but necessary, nonetheless, closure of meaning which ‘is not the end, but which makes both politics and identity possible’ (Hall 1987: 45).

Our approach is also grounded in a focus on the politics of signification in the context of textual analysis – the structuralist and poststructuralist language of signs, codes, discourses and texts is central to the CDA we carry out here, but it further combines with flexible linguistic analysis (CDA draws heavily on Halliday’s (1985) functional linguistics) and intertextual analysis (as a way of linking texts and contexts). The promise of CDA we were drawn to is that it offers a toolbox for detailed analysis of language-in-use which can show *how* social constructions are built, and, importantly to this article, how people make identity-related claims about themselves and others, and what they achieve as they do so. Our focus on intertextuality, identified with narratives, genres and discourses is a further important element of the analysis we offer.

Following Fairclough's (1992, 2003) Foucauldian-inspired approach, we use intertextuality, discourse and genre to analyse texts' relations with other texts in the 'orders of discourse' (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1971) of which they are part. We were primarily interested in articulations of race and racism within the order of discourse of the liberal intellectual commentariat: we take race and racism to be apparatuses for the government of populations, and we focussed on an array of publicly active 'intellectuals' – thinkers, academics, commentators, journalists, writers and activists – exploring how they help construct and apply categories that designate certain populations in racialized terms for the purposes of efficient governance. Our focus on and use of the category 'intellectuals' draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) who emphasized intellectuals' role in shaping public thinking by providing the moral and intellectual legitimacy to ideas, interpretations and political projects. As 'the milieus that manage opinion' (Ranciere, 2014: 85) and experts on 'culture', they are powerfully placed to articulate and disseminate their theories of culture, crises and cultural difference. Some of the texts we analyse also include professional politicians' texts because some of the persons quoted are active both politically and academically, and in the discourses discussed, it is often difficult to discern where the academic in question stops talking and the politician proper begins. Throwing light on the cross-pollination between their aims and approaches, we highlight how often, across these groups, the very same presuppositions and attitudes predominate. Academic pronouncements overlap with ideas espoused by more overtly 'political' actors; intellectual discourses being politically forceful in their own right.

The majority of the media texts examined included editorials and interviews, which had circulated widely in Bulgarian media. The criteria for selecting texts for analysis comprised (1) content discussing Roma and/or refugees, (2) content authored by public figures who openly identify as politically liberal and/or (3) content published in popular media outlets, which identify themselves as liberal. The core set of texts we studied closely numbered a dozen texts from mainstream (online) media including *Dnevnik*, *Dnes*, the Bulgarian edition of *Deutsche Welle*, *Mediapool*, *Offnews*, *WebCafe* and *Kultura*. As part of the movement between texts and contexts which CDA prescribes, we also further read texts by authors – and on media platforms – which were placed on the more conservative end of the political spectrum, as this was key to our attempt to trace relevant links and 'elective affinities' between liberal and conservative speech; our investigation also led us to engage with several foreign media publications which helped link our analysis of the texts at hand with the broader social context. Following Fairclough and drawing on the concepts of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and hegemony we treated the texts collected for analysis as 'discursive events', which are simultaneously texts, discursive practices and social practices.

After an initial scoping exercise prompted us to look for 'elective affinities' between liberal and conservative speech, we coded the data for discourse content, which pertained to conceptualizations of such binaries as Self and Other, Europe and Islam, threat and opportunity, and broader conceptualizations of 'culture', 'difference', 'class', 'citizenship', as well as for discursive strategies of referential nomination, predication, argumentation and othering (including stereotyping, racialization, and objectification). In studying every discursive event, we followed a loose description–interpretation–explanation scheme – consistently shifting (in a non-linear fashion) between describing, interpreting

and explaining and we read texts closely examining their content, vocabulary, intertextuality and use of literary devices; we examined the processes underlying the texts' discursive production and dissemination (e.g. who the authors were, where the texts were published and possibly republished), and linking what we were observing to the broader social context. The latter demanded a certain level of expertise which the authors – a social anthropologist and a sociologist working in the field of postsocialism, and having close familiarity with the Bulgarian context – were able to offer. Broadly following CDA's guidelines, during the first stage of our analysis, we concerned ourselves with the more or less 'hard data' of the linguistic (lexico-grammatical) features of the texts, followed by a second stage of interpretation where our own cultural and educational backgrounds as well as our values and politics would have influenced our analysis in ways that make our CDA-inspired approach a politically committed endeavour that is itself a constitutive part of cultural politics. We believe such a culture-bound, context-specific, textually oriented analysis can prove highly valuable in offering empirically driven insights that complement cultural studies' critical efforts.

How cold economic calculus meanders in hot racism

We begin with some examples of what we take to be a tolerant and utilitarian liberal approach to recent refugees from Syria. On the face of it, this is a genuinely accepting approach. In the course of the discussion, we highlight moments that liberal utilitarianism shares with conservative and far-right approaches to the 'surplus populations' of refugees (Rajaram, 2018) and the racist patina in both. The implications of the elective affinities between them are teased out in the next section.

In the Bulgarian liberal public sphere, refugees, or parts of their populations, are sometimes construed as potentially 'economically useful'. In articles published in liberal media, under such titles as 'Let the immigrants in and let them make money' (Ikonist, 2015), 'Bulgaria's opportunity with the refugees' (Nikov, 2013), and 'Let the refugees generate our pensions' (Dichev, 2015b), the prospects for reaping benefits from the refugee influx are firmly insisted upon. But, as the excerpt below suggests, the authors – from an intellectual-activist network, DEOS, whose name stands for Movement for European Unification and Solidarity, and who later formed a short-lived liberal party – would not open the borders to everybody:

Labour migration: more quality, not quantity

[. . .] It is in the interest of Bulgaria to keep as many of the highly educated and qualified migrants as possible. To this end, we need to ensure opportunities for them to practice their profession. Integration is to give opportunity to the talented and the abled! Education, education, education – this is the key to successful integration and good relationships. The purpose is that people – and especially immigrants – take their lives in their own hands, instead of relying on the state. [. . .] This will be an important investment for Bulgaria. (VeVesti, 2015)

Prominent commentators from within academia, such as social anthropologist Ivaylo Dichev, advocate a virtually identical cherry-picking strategy vis-à-vis the refugees: in a

popular media intervention, Dichev (2015a, 2015b) argues that we should 'choose' the better qualified and educated Syrians.

At first glance, in these interventions neither race nor even culture seems to be problematic (and culture here certainly appears less essentialized than in overtly racist perspectives), but class is: the uneducated, low-skilled, uncreative and unproductive are undesired – they have nothing to offer in return for 'European hospitality'. This carves out a symptomatic moral divide between wanted and unwanted migrants, pitting the figure of the idle, non-productive parasite relying on social benefits against the active and productive citizen. Liberal humanism here is reduced to the pragmatic calculation of utility: human lives matter only insofar as they are in service to 'us'. It is this division, grounded in a neoliberal moral economy (see Sayer, 2007), which is enacted through the now commonplace differentiation between 'economic migrants' and 'political refugees'. 'Economic migrants' run from poverty and are likely to be unskilled (unaccomplished in their country of origin) and prone to 'laze around' welfare; political refugees, however, run from political violence and are more likely to function as successful market subjects, capable of 'reviving our economy', to quote another common trope.

Such a liberal Darwinist position at least appears non-racist – in conservative-racist narratives, this moral opposition usually comes with a racializing move, but here race and even culture first appear erased – their skin colour does not matter, as long as they can 'feed our ageing population'. However, the move to impose a moral divide on the refugee population necessarily comes from the position of a collective subjectivity, which contradicts liberalism's own individualist ontology, while implicitly racializing the collective Other. Within the logic of a collectivist self-defence – and an assumed position of superiority (which lies at the heart of the concept of racism) – decisions are made as to who deserves to 'be given opportunities' (which in the precarious position that refugees find themselves, in often means 'who deserves to be allowed to survive', that is, in the best tradition of Spencer's survival of the fittest).

Much of liberal-intellectual talk on refugees is further problematic once it is juxtaposed to their commentary on 'the Roma problem'. Although many of them criticize popular racism towards refugees – what they dub 'vernacular fascism' (Bedrov, 2014; Daynov, 2013) – declaring it proof of 'the masses' barbarism', they did rush to defend ethnic Bulgarians in the 2015 conflict with the Roma in the village of Gurmen, asserting that the former's 'protest is legitimate, people are afraid of wide-spread gypsy criminality' – social anthropologist Haralan Aleksandrov (2015) in a popular media publication deploys the long-refuted 'culture of poverty' framework to argue that culture produces Roma criminality that people find increasingly difficult to tolerate. Meanwhile, Antonina Jeliaskova – also an anthropologist and again in a popular mainstream media publication – states that Roma 'ungratefulness' for 'Bulgarian generosity' naturally leads to reprisals against the Roma (Vesti, 2015). Much like 19th-century bourgeois moral panic at the 'dangerous classes', she recommends increased police presence in Roma slums, solitary confinement and forced labour, performed in public for the misbehaving Roma.

Thus, hate speech against Roma seems acceptable, but hate speech targeted at refugees – not. The image of the enemy mutates according to the group towards which liberal critique is applied. Through this malleability of the enemy, intellectuals and political actors devise and impose a hierarchy of value on populations, with refugees occupying a

higher standing compared with the Roma, who are consigned to the bottom of the hierarchy of desirability, with this practice of hierarchization being grounded in the liberal calculation of economic efficacy (some refugees could ‘add value’; Roma, however, are ‘un-integratable’, as sociologist Andrei Raichev claimed (Tsvetanova, 2015).

At the same time, as economics is used as grounds for sympathetic non-racist political argumentation, refugees’ political identities have not ceased to conjure up a sense of threat. While refugees’ economic value is asserted, their cultural identities appear temporarily suspended, only to implicitly reemerge as a ‘threat’ within the framework of proposed ‘solutions’ to what is commonly hailed as ‘legitimate’ fears of Europeans/Bulgarians about ‘cultural incompatibility’, in the form of, most commonly, education for assimilation purposes (just like for the Roma). Yet, these and similar overtly non-racist sets of ‘solutions’ routinely draw on a varied set of more explicitly racializing and xenophobic language. We explore these next.

A Roma-refugee coupling

As introduced earlier, 2015 was marked by tensions between ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Roma which started as a neighbourly quarrel over ‘loud music’, but was picked up by media and some political parties who formulated it as an ‘ethnic conflict’, which ‘had been simmering for a long time’ due to ‘gypsy criminality’. Some far-right public figures rushed to declare what was happening, a ‘civil war’ (Popov, 2015). At the same time, the European-wide ‘problem’ with refugees fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East fuelled an intense moral panic.

Our choice to compare illiberal enunciations about the Roma and the refugees was dictated not only by the temporal coincidence of the ‘crises’ but also by the wider discursive trend in Bulgaria to draw these together. For example, Bulgaria’s Prime Minister at the time argued that living conditions for refugees are not optimal but so are those of many Bulgarian citizens, adding that ‘we take care of thousands of Roma. Billions are spent on them each year to keep them inside the country. They also came here from somewhere . . . through time’ (Newsbg, 2015). On top of rehearsing a common stereotype that Roma came to Europe from India or Egypt, the bizarre statement that Roma need to be kept inside the country places them even more firmly on an equal footing with the refugees subject to the Dublin II regulatory framework, which deports a wandering migrant to their first EU-country of entry.

Despite the substantial differences between the two populations targeted by exclusionary rhetoric, anti-Roma racism supplies the material (and the form) subsequently applied (with slight modifications) to the newly arrived Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis. The smooth transition from ‘the Roma problem’ to the ‘refugee problem’ is also facilitated by the spatial coincidence and co-existence of these groups in Bulgaria’s capital city. More specifically, the area around the newly gentrified Women’s market in Sofia had been for a number of years an ‘eyesore’ for a civil society organization, which successfully pushed for the gentrification of the area and the expulsion of the Roma market traders (see Venkov, 2012). Today this area emerges again as a focal point of contestation – the presence of the only mosque in Sofia nearby serves as a point of congregation for the city’s Middle Eastern population. Though Syrians, Afghans and other migrants

residing in Sofia do not live solely within the vicinity of the market, the area's centrality and image as part of 'Old Sofia' – shorthand for reactionary nostalgia for the period before 1944 – make the presence of migrants there more visible and irritating than in other, less prestigious areas. The 2015 local election debates demonstrated that a consensus reigned among candidates from the rival parties that 'these people are out of place there', or that the area is turning into a 'Little Arabia', with the social-democratic candidate being one of the most vocal opponents of the refugees. It is worth opening a bracket here to consider the use of the label 'Little Arabia'. In line with mainstream political concerns, Angel Dzhambazki – then ex-city councillor from the far-right VMRO party but elected with the lists of the ruling liberal party of GERB, also a Member of the European Parliament and a mayoral-candidate from the far-right Patriotic Front composed of VMRO and NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria) which is in the ruling coalition with two liberal pro-EU parties – asserted that 'the centre of Sofia is turning into a Little Arabia, while its peripheries are becoming unsafe; there are also too many gypsy autonomous enclaves'. While Dzhambazki's talk is characteristic of the far-right position his party occupies, it is noteworthy that Dzhambazki envelopes his racism in the liberal language of rights and duties. He also claims that special rights based on ethnic origins constitute 'discrimination' against the law-abiding citizens, adding that

you won't find a single normal capital city around the world whose central areas house hostels, brothels, warehouses and the like, and which turn into enclaves for people who do not share our values, our understanding for law and order, our way of life. [. . .] all illegal immigrants' dorms have to be removed from our city and have to be sent where they belong, namely, to the border. (Konstantinov, 2015)

NFSB also became famous in the 2014 elections with a proposal to intern all Roma to labour camps serving as tourist attractions showcasing 'gypsies' authentic way of life'. When concerns were raised that the profile of this party hardly fits the pro-European liberal ruling coalition, Daniel Smilov, one of the most prominent liberal political scientists, argued that the GERB-Reform Bloc-Patriotic Front coalition is 'the purest and most feasible choice from the point of view of ideology and the logic of politics' (Smilov, 2014).

Similarly, a Roma-refugee nexus was developed by the prominent TV host and political commentator Kevork Kevorkiyan who asserted that the increasing numbers of Syrians will turn Bulgaria into a *katun*, a pejorative word for gypsy/traveller camp (Kevorkiyan, 2015). In the same vein, Andrei Raichev, sociologist and public intellectual, argued that 'Bulgarians perceive the refugees as a sort of gypsies' (Andreev, 2015a). When asked in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, what he thought was specific to Bulgaria's concern with the otherwise European-wide refugee crisis, Raichev felt it necessary to begin with a reflection on the problem of Roma emigrating from Bulgaria into Western Europe, and found the problem of immigrating refugees and emigrating Roma to be two sides of the same coin (Andreev, 2015a):

Bulgaria and Romania are in a complicated situation because, on the one hand, as EU-member states they have to host refugees, but on the other, they are 'exporters' of migrants. These are both sides of the same coin.

The Bulgarian immigrants abroad – this is primarily a Roma problem, although it is not officially defined as Roma. Mrs. Merkel recently said that not all migrants are welcome. Those coming to take welfare without working are not welcome. This is perfectly reasonable. Yet, we need to explicate something. This is not about Bulgarian or Romanian immigrants. It's about gypsies. However, because of the inferiority complex Germans have due to WWII, and also Europeans in general, because of political correctness, even the word Roma is not uttered. This bears direct relevance on the topic of the refugees in Bulgaria. It is not nice to say it but Bulgarians consider immigrants in their country as a type of gypsies because this is the only Bulgarian experience with alterity. Therefore, Bulgarians hold an extremely negative view about refugees. (Andreev, 2015a)

Pairing the definition of the 'problems' and hence their solutions, Raichev superimposes the 'refugee problem' over the 'Roma problem' – and since there are already available answers to the Roma problem (in another article, Raichev claimed the Roma are 'un-integratable', 'not even through education' because of 'the too great a cultural distance') (Tsvetanova, 2015), the solution to the refugee crisis is also clear. By manufacturing a Roma-refugee coupling, Raichev is able to suggest that since Europe is hostile towards Roma immigration, Bulgaria can unproblematically reject refugees wanting to immigrate to Bulgaria: it can say that it does not want them without compromising its standing in Europe, without contravening European liberal values. That is, Bulgaria can afford to act in a racist manner without relinquishing a European/liberal identity but even buttressing it. Thus, the Roma-refugee nexus serves justificatory purposes for the exclusion of both Roma and refugees as it normalizes the liberal ideal of the hard-working, self-sufficient and self-helping individual. Yet, in the last sentence in the excerpt here, Raichev preempts potential accusations of racism by attributing the pairing of the Roma and the refugees to 'Bulgarians'.

Liz Fekete (2009) argues that once structures of exclusion are erected for one group in society, they can easily be adapted to others. Racist rhetoric and practices against Roma in Bulgaria have by now become deeply ingrained in the political life of the country, allowing for the dovetailing of these existing semiotic and extra-semiotic structures of exclusion to a new Other: the refugee. Yet, as the practice of hierarchizing surplus populations discussed above shows, the superimposition of the two enemies – the Roma and the Refugee – is not always as straightforward.

Those more explicitly racist discursive lines adopted by intellectuals (and parties) on the political mainstream often wish to be seen as liberal, but not necessarily on all issues. At the same time, they do not wish to be seen as taking a far-right perspective, and frequently warn against 'the dangers' coming from the 'populist' far-right if 'we don't face the problem head on and instead let [the far-right] do so' (Vesti, 2015). They are not overly concerned with political labels and tend to present their positions as post-political and as 'pure expertise', so their internal contradictions and paradoxes often go unacknowledged or are difficult to challenge. The discourses here are defined by a tactic of pathologizing differences seen as endangering the safety and moral integrity of the community: most often, this is the European community, rather than the national community that traditionally tends to be the far-right's concern. This surfaces most clearly in experts' commentaries about Islam and the refugees.

Intellectuals and Islam

Ever since Said (1978), Islam has often been discussed as the Other that enables the articulation of a unitary European identity (see Diez, 2004). Moreover, as Massad (2015) has shown, Islam functions to stabilize liberalism via dyadic oppositions of freedom to oppression, women's rights versus retrograde misogyny, and so on. Building on this scholarship, we show that the figure of 'Islam' (and the fear thereof) reanimates the post-political consensus which characterizes liberalism after 1989. In Bulgaria, the unity of post-politics (or consensus-based politics) today is thus maintained not only by the unquestioned necessity for liberal reforms (in the judiciary, for example) and austerity measures, but also by the shared recognition that 'Islam' is a problem.

While the 'clash of civilizations' theory is associated with neo-Conservative Realpolitik, the theory has become increasingly popular within liberal discourses. Partly what enables this cross-pollination between conservative and liberal thought is liberalism's recent tendency to acquire a cultural (or civilizational) essence, mutating from a political doctrine making claims for universal validity, into a cultural and thus particularist entity. In other words, liberalism, as understood by secular public intellectuals, functions as an ersatz Christianity, facing the threat of Islamic 'totalitarianism'. This transforms its conception of secularism from an egalitarian to an 'identitarian' one (Tevanian, 2011, cited in Lentin, 2014).

For instance, Ognian Minchev, a popular political commentator and democratization expert, justifies his plea for Bulgaria (and Europe) to halt the 'influx of immigrants' by fusing it with the issue of 'radical Islamism':

We resist radical islamism not because it is based on another religious tradition that is different from ours. We oppose it because it is a negation of the values of freedom which we share and without which we cannot live. (Minchev, 2015)

The issue formulated here is posed as a classical liberal problem concerning 'the toleration of the intolerant' (Joppke, 2009) and illustrates the common fallacy of essentializing Muslims (reducing them to 'the intolerant') and Islam (reducing it to 'radical'), as well as reifying culture itself to the exclusion of all other modes of explanation. What is more, liberalism begins to function as a unitary cultural-civilizational framework that European people supposedly inhabit. This latest repetition of the struggle against 'totalitarianism' is therefore much more sinister than its Cold War precedent. The totalitarianism of today does not refer to the political organization of a given society whose supposed 'side effects' on people's 'mentality' and culture many intellectuals battle to this day – as one of the go-to culprits for many, to this day, is what they see as the living 'metastases of communism' plaguing the transition. If anything, it is the opposite: the post-political totalitarianism of today is cultural-civilizational ('rule of Sharia law'). And while some intellectuals insist on the difference between 'radical' and 'moderate' Islam, they are not always able to maintain the separation. For example, the cultural anthropologist Ivaylo Dichev, commenting on the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015, forfeits the distinction and argues that Islam-as-such has not shed its 'medieval' vestiges and has not gone through Reformation and Renaissance (Dichev, 2015c).

This explains why, in contrast to the Cold War celebration of ‘the few heroic individuals and dissidents’ who dared challenge the system, the new (Islamic) ‘totalitarianism’ is perceived as too powerful and lacking in any dissidents. Eastern Europe before 1989 had individuals, ‘Islam’ today does not. The classic totalitarian paradigm was (rightfully) accused of grinding the complexity of social, political and economic life in socialism, and of maintaining an uncritical fidelity to the few ‘liberal exceptions’ (i.e. dissidents) who somehow managed to keep their ‘personal integrity’ in the face of the supposed all-encompassing totalitarian state. But the contemporary totalitarian paradigm leaves no scope for ‘liberal subjects’ because its cultural-civilizational foundations (fortified by an Orientalist understanding of Islam) already presuppose collective subjects, trapped in their rigid cultural matrix. As Wendy Brown (2006) succinctly puts it, “‘we’ have culture, while culture has ‘them’” (p. 151). Even when they physically escape from it, as is the case with refugees fleeing from the Islamic State, they are still considered carriers of the same values they run away from. While during the Cold War, Eastern European anti-communists fleeing Communism were not considered Communists by virtue of being, say Bulgarian citizens, there is no such effort at discerning conflicting political positions with regards to the refugees: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the people who flee it are one and the same entity simply because of ‘Islam’.

Such discourses do not allow for subtleties and differences to rupture the smooth cultural blanket enveloping its subjects. Instead of the institutionalization of antagonism-free existence for ‘individuals and their families’, as promised by ‘end of history’ expectations and Thatcherism, the dissolution of the social and political wrought by the success of the neoliberal consensus produced moral and post-political Manichean conflicts between ‘good and evil’ (like the ‘war on terror’). Instead of ensuring the blossoming of liberal individuals, it presented us with rigid collective and racialized identities animated by new fundamentalisms. Liberalism has been re-focussed not as politics but as a ‘cultural core’ and made into one of the competing totalizing religiosities.

For example, the Bulgarian edition of *Deutsche Welle* published an article entitled ‘The West must defend its values’ by social scientist Ulrike Ackermann (2015):

The economic migrants from the Balkan states, just like the political refugees, strive towards the affluent West and its standards of living. They crave that which their despotic rulers want to destroy – our liberal economic and political order and our modern way of life.

And:

We cannot expect that only persecuted Christians and enlightened Syrian doctors will seek asylum in Germany. Previous experience [. . .] shows that there are parallel societies where honour killings, forced marriages and Salafism occur. It is unlikely that these problems will diminish with the aliens arriving from the Arab countries.

However, she warns that this ‘mass migration’ will only be hassle-free if the foreigners are made to accept ‘our liberal values’. By comparison, the duty of the West is to ‘safeguard its hard-won values and way of life’. Just like the Bulgarian far-right politician Angel Dzhabazki, the German sociologist also speaks of ‘cultural enclaves’, which threaten the liberal ‘ways of life’ of the West.

Similarly, a Bulgarian journalist writing for *Deutsche Welle* argued that, if Germany does not want to regret its own hospitality, it will have to reinforce in the minds of refugees that:

the defining foundation of our society is the Constitution, and not the Qu'ran. The refugees need to understand that homosexuality is socially accepted and nobody goes in jail for it, as they do in many countries in the Middle East. The newcomers also need to know that parents cannot beat their children here and that in Germany, going to school is mandatory and this rule has to be observed. (Spasovska, 2015)

Observing the law though, is not enough. The migrants will also have to adopt the unwritten 'European' cultural norms, as another article in the DW fretting over the burning question of 'why are [the refugees] mostly men?' claimed that the newly arrived 'entertain a series of archaic moral ideas in their minds and have to get used to the fact that here [in Europe] same-sex couples can kiss on the street' (Andreev, 2015b).

The fact that same-sex couples' rights are a very recent addition to the civilizational bundle of 'European culture' and still severely contested (by respectable Catholics rather than by Islamists) is not acknowledged. (It is also only since the mid-20th century that liberalism was transfigured from a term identifying a limited and contested position within political discourse to either the most authentic expression of the Western tradition or a constitutive feature of the West itself, see Bell, 2014.) It is through such problematic strategies of substituting 'liberalism' for 'Christianity', and of retroactively projecting liberalism back to the historical foundations of the West within a culturalist framework (Bell, 2014), that Bulgarian commentators are able to use the religious, political and cultural 'Other' to redefine a new, collectivist version of the liberal 'Self'. What is striking is that even conservatives, like Kalin Yanakiev, a founding member of a marginal Bulgarian conservative party and a theologian at Sofia University, incorporates traditional liberal concerns such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/transsexual (LGBT) and women's rights as integral part of the 'European civilization', which he casts as a 'cultural dome' – standing not just above all other cultures but also capable of enveloping them all and making their co-habitation possible (Yanakiev, 2015). As a 'vault', naturally, the 'European culture' is superior to the cultures it vaults, argues Yanakiev (Yanakiev, 2015).

Hristo Butsev, the editor-in-chief of the main liberal weekly *Kultura*, provides a clear example of the transformation of liberalism into a cultural or civilizational predicate that is fundamentally incompatible with the refugees' supposed Islamic culture. The construct of this cultural liberalism is accompanied with an urgency to 're-think' and even abandon some of liberalism's foundational notions such as human rights, which are depicted by Butsev as 'weapons of the immigrants' threatening European civilization (Butsev, 2015). The political implications of the defences of 'the European civilisation' by Yanakiev and Butsev are strikingly different: by urging us to 're-think' human rights, Butsev, a self-professed liberal, emerges as even more authoritarian than the Conservative Yanakiev who is ready to accept multiculturalism and even gay rights in his battle to affirm European cultural superiority vis-à-vis Islam.

To Butsev (2015), if we are to rethink [individual] human rights and tie them more strictly together with [collective] duties ('the family, the Motherland, the state, cultural

community, race, humanity?'), it will be solely 'the result of the process of uncontrolled invasion with impunity into the European lands which we witness today'. In these metaphors about the refugees, Butsev asserts that 'integration of the newcomers into the local cultural environment is a sine qua non for the survival of European culture'. Yet, he warns that

the framework of co-habitation which European civilization offers today – the secular state – is not enough. More efforts to uproot the civilizational habits brought here from outside will be needed. It has to be remembered that these efforts must be proportionate to the quantity of the migrants. (Butsev, 2015)

Butsev (2015) is an optimist though:

Perhaps the rethinking of European values which the pedestrian invasion of 'war refugees' will trigger will include the refusal of Europe to self-mortify in its melancholic gaze in its past mistakes; perhaps Europe will say it loudly that it believes in its culture, believes that it is better than other cultures, and being Europeans – yes, that makes us proud. We need to rethink our constant guilt trip soon. Very soon.

While statements such as 'I refuse to apologize for colonialism and for being a white, middle-class male' have traditionally been associated with the conservative right, they increasingly populate liberal, mainstream political and intellectual rhetoric.

Although the intellectuals and political figures under scrutiny here understand refugees from the Middle East to endanger Europe, it is by no means self-evident what they mean by 'Europe'. 'Europe' is a strange signifier, articulating disparate moments in a coherent, yet fragile chain of signification. This enables the projection of conflicting interpretations of what Europe actually means and is. Ex-constitutional judge Georgi Markov (BNT, 2015), for example, proposed an extravagant interpretation that revives the Cold War division between East and West: today Europe bifurcates into 'adequate' and 'inadequate' parts. Counter-intuitively, this time around, the model Europe is not Western but Eastern Europe in its insistence on national sovereignty and the rejection of refugees. By contrast, Western Europe 'is pushing us into a European-Islamist union'. The inchoate reference to the Cold War is not accidental. In another interview, Markov praised the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban asserting that 'November [2015] will be as dramatic as November 1989 when the European people rose against communism, and now they will rise up against Islamism' (Peeva, 2015). He claims that by accepting refugees, the 'Brussels bureaucrats' have downgraded all Europeans, who become

second-class citizens: they have to put up with blockades of trains, with becoming street sweepers of the newcomers, with being rendered unable to use the highways and being afraid to go on the street. (Peeva, 2015)

The parallel between communism and Islamism is not a recent phenomenon. Edward Said (1978) had long demonstrated how political Islam was treated as the new 'totalitarianism'. What is new, however, is the direction this new totalitarianism emerges from: simultaneously from the East and the West, with an embattled and 'free' Central-Eastern

Europe 'insisting on its European essence' squeezed in the middle. The new role for intellectuals and politicians in the region then is increasingly seen as one of 'interdiction': serving to disrupt or even destroy the enemy forces en route to the heart of Europe.

Similarly, Vaclav Klaus, former Czech prime minister and free market reformer, stated that 'Europe is committing suicide' (OFFNews, 2015):

Migration is not a natural human right. Believing that it is, is a fatal error and if Europe continues to hold this belief, it will commit suicide. As you can see on television, these people are not impoverished unfortunates from conflict zones but young men in fancy clothing with mobile phones and iPads.

Furthermore, he adds that '[the refugees] trigger [an] entropy of European culture, civilization, value systems and our religious structure' and have the potential to turn Europe into a 'box of sardines'. For him, this problem can be solved by upping democracy at an institutional level, meaning that majority voting in the EU has to be replaced by consensus-based decision-making. 'Consensus will liberate us from the dictatorship of the European Commission', concludes Klaus.

Conclusion

By analysing these discourses, we shed light on the ways in which established 'experts of culture' in Bulgaria operate within a racialized notion of culture to construct an image of the anti-European/anti-liberal 'enemy' and, in the process, often re-define the contours of the liberal Self. Through the coupling of the image of the non-European/non-liberal refugee Other with the equally 'foreign' and 'hostile' image of the Roma Other, the long-established exclusionary discursive structures carved for the old 'internal parasite' serve as a matrix for the creation of similarly racist constructions targeting the new 'external adversary'. Yet, the superimposition of the two 'surplus populations' is not always straightforward: there is a diversity of definitions and solutions to the two 'problems', which produce splintered images of the problematic enemy subjects, often imposing hierarchical schemes both within ('some refugees are better for us than others') and between ('the refugees are still better for us than the Roma') them.

The essentialization some intellectuals' discourses carry out in relation to the refugee population as a profoundly Islamic (i.e. religious) enemy is a fallacy additionally reinforced by the superimposition of Islam on the (familiar enemy of) 'totalitarianism'. As struggles for difference are always, at the same time, also struggles for identity, defining one's 'Other' in cultural-religious terms leads to one's own re-definition. Thus, we are seeing the political identity of liberalism defined by its claims for universal validity and its individualist ontology, gradually mutate into a culturalist, and hence particularist and identitarian subjectivity, grounded in quasi-religiosity. From a universalist temporal framework of linear historical progress, liberalism mutates to a particular space: a cozy *heimat* under threat from unassimilable Others. As we demonstrate, the seemingly unproblematic pairing of liberalism with Christianity occurs in both conservative and liberal discourse in Bulgaria.

The new culturalist framework imposed on the Other erases the political: the seemingly political rhetoric of ‘Islamic totalitarianism’ turns out to be a tag for a rigid cultural-religious order, wherein the liberal principles of individualism do not apply – no ‘individual’ subjects/rebels, similar to ‘our’ own anti-communist fighters, are recognized in the figure of the homogenized Islamic Other. It is as part of this series of inter-related (re)definitions that the image of the refugee is cast not just in the mould of the Other, but of the hostile and malevolent enemy, which emerges as an existential threat that requires a culturally unified response, warranting a plea for ‘our collective responsibilities’ for ‘saving Europe’.

This emergent new liberal positioning, with its ‘collective responsibilities’, erases the egalitarian logic that it simultaneously espouses. In this sense, this emerging amalgam of the neoliberal fantasy of the economically ‘useful Syrian individual’, combined with a cultural-collectivist conception of the Self locked in a geopolitical antagonism with the Other, generates a new culturalist language that escalates both political and economic asymmetries; it is a looming Frankenstein that combines the traditional cold calculus of the ‘free market’ with the hot racism of identitarian politics.

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