Introduction: From Comparison to Relationality

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More than a million displaced people—mostly from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—found their way—often undertaking a perilous journey—to Europe in 2015. For 2016, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) expects their number to reach 290,000.[1] In contrast to previous years in which the Mediterranean route was most common, in 2015, 700,000 of this million-plus arrived via the so-called western Balkan route, which leads through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and/or Croatia. The latter two are not only EU member states but also belong to the Schengen zone, within which border patrols are as a rule absent.[2] Kosovars had primed this route in early 2015, when an estimated 50,000 left in January and February alone, and they continued in large numbers to share the route with people from the Middle East, accounting for an estimated 12% of the illegal border crossers. Even though eastern Europe, including the postsocialist countries of the Balkans, served more as a transit area than a destination for these displaced people, their appearance within the countries of eastern Europe in such large numbers was sudden, and, for many, anxiety-provoking. Their visibility was much increased and their impatience much provoked by the inaction and by the various policies on the part of the Hungarian government especially, which had a vested interest in stoking fear and thus increasing its dwindling popularity.[3]

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1. "Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route, January to December 2016 (Revision May 2016)," UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), at www.unhcr.org/partners/donors/577220cf7/regional-refugee-migrant-response-plan-europe-january-december-2016-revision.html?query=EU%20migration%20crisis%202016 (last accessed February 10, 2017).

2. The Schengen zone is a region within Europe first established in 1995 and expanded since, in which internal borders have been eliminated so that people can cross without passport. While Greece is in the Schengen zone, Hungary is the first contiguous member state that is within this area free of border patrols. In March of 2016, following the EU's agreement with Turkey to "hold onto" and take back migrants, this route was essentially closed, the border between Greece and Macedonia was reinforced and strict border patrols were implemented along the way. This has initially led to the stranding of tens of thousands of people in Serbia, Greece, and Macedonia.

3. There was a short time interval in which Hungarian authorities did not allow these people on the move to travel on, leading to their spectacular congregation at railway stations.

What has since 2015 been called Europe's migrant or refugee crisis has raised renewed doubts about eastern Europe's Europeanness. Hungary's erection of a border fence, its and other neighbors' indifference towards or outright inhumane treatment of the displaced, as well as the anti-migrant rhetoric of politicians in former socialist countries, have been pointed to as evidence that these newcomers to the west have not fully adopted European values. Among the values primarily mentioned are solidarity, tolerance for certain ethnic, religious, or racial others, respect for human rights, and accepting obligations arising from their EU membership.

Of all the east European governments, Hungary, unsurprisingly, has received the most attention for its reaction. In 2015, Hungary saw the illegal entry of about 65,000 people (a tenfold increase from 2014).[4] It also received the second most number of asylum claims in Europe (second to Germany, but highest per capita).[5] In the fall of 2015, the Hungarian government put up a barbed wire fence on its border with Serbia and Croatia, meant to be permanent, and a temporary one on its border with Slovenia.[6] This sudden and radical move was initially criticized by Serbia, with Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić's infamous cry that this in effect would turn Serbia into Auschwitz—leaving one with the lingering question of whether it is the refugees or the Serbs who were being turned into prisoners.[7] Eventually however, Hungary's support for Serbia's EU membership and its pledge to assist in patrolling borders throughout the Balkans led to differences being smoothed out. The seeming unity of former socialist states culminated in the February 2016 meeting of the Visegrád countries, to which Bulgaria's and Macedonia's representatives were also invited. Uniting the former socialist countries was their opposition to any obligatory migrant quota the EU might impose on them, which was in most of these countries accompanied by a virulent anti-migrant ideological campaign, and which also took aim at Brussels for failing to implement effective border protection, as well as for expecting an open-arms policy towards people on the move.[8] Many former socialist countries of eastern Europe have engaged in similar rhetoric that numerous observers have labeled as xenophobic, racist, inhumane, and contrary to European values. In reference to a

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4. "Kiderült, Eddig Hányan Lépték át Illegálisan a Határt," *Figyelö Online,* June 29, 2016, at www.figyelo.hu/index.php?cid=434775-kiderult--eddig-hanyan-leptek-at-illegalisan-a-hatart (last accessed February 10, 2017).

5. This number refers to so-called first claims. Even though most entrants did not wish to stay in Hungary, according to the Dublin III regulation, refugees must ask for asylum in the country where they first enter the EU. Many refused to register exactly because they did not wish to stay in Hungary. Such refusal to be fingerprinted was used as a justification for the authorities' inhumane treatment.

6. There had also been a plan, and preparations were indeed made, for erecting a physical barrier on the Romanian border as well, but most likely due to the symbolism of closing off Transylvanian Hungarians from the motherland, this was abandoned.

7. "Serbia's Vucic hits out at Hungarian migrant fence," *Morning Star,* June 19, 2015, at www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-bddb-Serbias-Vucic-hits-out-at-Hungarian-migrant-fence#.WKNce1Pytph (last accessed February 10, 2017).

8. Poland had initially, that is before the electoral success of the right-wing Law and Justice Party, voted for the measure to reallocate migrants and refugees according a quota in all EU member states.

mental disorder called empathy deficit, Ivan Krastev called their reaction to the migrants eastern Europe's "compassion deficit" on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* in September 2015.[9]

This portrayal of course harkened back to an earlier geopolitical division around the Iraq War, in which most east European governments—though not necessarily their people—took the side of the U.S., famously prompting Donald Rumsfeld to anoint east European new member states as the "new Europe." Especially for us area scholars, however, it also echoed enduring Orientalist tropes about eastern Europe and the Balkans.[10] One way to criticize this portrayal has been to point out the hypocrisy of the west, going back to the expulsion of 8,000 Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France in 2010 and the closure of the border between France and Italy in 2011 to block the entrance into France of African refugees. The Calais Jungle and the other border closures in the Summer and Fall of 2015 demonstrate that national(ist) responses have been present at the heart of the EU and that open borders are not an unequivocal good in the west either.[11] We can also point to the EU's agreement with Turkey in early 2015, which many have described as the effective outsourcing of refugee assistance to Turkey. While at a certain level this hypocrisy argument is valid, as critical scholars studying the region, we find that argument just as limited and limiting as calling entire populations racist. Doing so not only effectively ends any dialogue—who would want to converse with someone with such a view?—but also shortcuts scholarly analysis.

What is a critical scholar to do then? Are we doomed to choose between the Scylla of anti-migrant nationalism (if not racism) and Charybdis of labeling eastern Europeans *en bloc* nationalist and racist? Do we automatically assign humanitarianism in our praising of western Europe and the EU by scolding eastern Europe? Or, do we unwittingly embrace eastern Europeans' alleged racism and barbarism by showing understanding towards their pro-fence position? Many, normally in the camp of the liberal opposition to racist or nationalist parties, have surprisingly taken the latter stance.[12] Furthermore, does a pro-migrant stance necessarily mean, as Slavoj Žižek has said, that we treat migrants as victims, denying them the ability to act as responsible

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9. Ivan Krastev, "Eastern Europe's Compassion Deficit," *The New York Times,* September 8, 2015, at www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?_r=0 (last accessed February 10, 2017)

10. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 1997); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994).

11. The Schengen Treaty allows the temporary reimplementation of border control in certain circumstances. The Calais Jungle refers to an encampment, since eliminated, where refugees and migrants mostly from Africa and Syria awaited an opportunity to cross into the U.K. via the Eurotunnel. The conditions in the camp deteriorated significantly when its population ballooned to over 6,000 in 2015.

12. To Hungarians, perhaps the most shocking had been György Konrád. See: Andrew Higgins, "Hungary's Migrant Stance, Once Denounced, Gains Some Acceptance," *The New York Times,* December 20, 2015, at www.nytimes.com/2015/12/21/world/europe/hungary-viktor-orban-migrant-crisis.html (last accessed February 10, 2017)

rational agents?[13] Conversely, can such agency be only conceptualized as dangerous, implying that they come with ill will, at least wanting to take European jobs or at worst with the ultimate goal of terrorizing and killing Europeans or turning the continent into a Caliphate?

The goal of this forum is to carve out, or at least signal possible paths to, a different scholarly and political position on eastern Europe's reaction to the 2015 migration crisis. This is necessary not only for the always-worthy scholarly goals of contextualization and conceptualization, but also because enduring tropes of east European indifference, if not outright barbarism, do inform who gets to be invited to the proverbial table where future solutions will be hammered out, and on whose terms such negotiations will take place.

Contextualization has so far been the most common way to counter the comparative approach that has yielded the one-sidedly negative portrayal of eastern Europe. For some this context is eastern Europe's lack of an experience with diversity; for others, it is a bad experience with diversity.[14] For the latter, negative reactions to communist-era internationalism or a longer-lasting tradition of elite urban cosmopolitanism is what makes Germany's welcoming policy taste so bitter for those east of the Elbe—a stance represented by Krastev in this volume. Another context invoked is the enduring economic inequality between core EU countries and the former socialist newcomers, something József Böröcz's world-system perspective has often invoked, and to which Krastev has also alluded in the aforementioned *New York Times* piece. One might also add that perhaps eastern Europeans have taken too seriously the western liberal critique of the communist nanny state and too eagerly adopted the ideal of the self-made man who expects nothing from others. The socialist-era moral obligation to help the less fortunate is now seen as soft, if not effeminate, and which Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Žižek now equally see as a misguided and dangerous self-effacing gesture on the part of west European citizens and governments.

Contextualization is a useful first step towards continuing, rather than shortcutting, the analysis, which we can now take to a higher level of abstraction—a methodological stance we call relationality. A relational perspective goes beyond contextualization by demonstrating stronger, though not necessarily causal, links between developments in the west and the east.[15] One type of relational argument could be that policy responses in east

13. Slavoj Žižek, "Migrants, Racists and the Left," interview by Ella Whelan, *Spiked Review*, May 2016, at www.spiked-online.com/spiked-review/article/migrants-racists-and-the-left/18395#.V81Qs0ArI0p, (last accessed February 10, 2017).

14. Vince Chadwick, "Timmermans: Central Europe has 'No Experience with Diversity,'" *POLITICO*, September 24, 2015, at www.politico.eu/article/migration-news-diversity-timmermans/ (last accessed February 10, 2017).

15. We have seen several moves in this direction even in our narrower area scholarship, see: Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Stanford, CA, 2011); Douglas Rogers, "Postsocialisms Unbound: Connections, Critiques, Comparisons," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1–15; Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (January 2009): 6–34; Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the

and west are reactions to the same shared global situation.[16] For Krastev, this is the growing and once promising trend of increasing interdependence and mobility; for Böröcz and Mahua Sarkar it is a world system in which eastern Europe continues to occupy the semi-periphery, with all its attendant economic dependencies.

Another version of a relational argument could be that forms and practices of exclusion and inclusion circulate transnationally, which could happen unintentionally and informally, or, such circulation could be the result of intentional diffusion, as was the case with the export of EU institutional-legal practices when ten former socialist countries joined this supranational organization. Of course, the two can occur together; for example, a particular way of thinking about difference can also accompany or clandestinely tag along with an exported mechanism of managing difference. The ways in which race rather than class has become the key framing device, for example, in the ideological interpretation of the migration crisis could be an outcome of just such a process. Böröcz and Sarkar hint at this, when they suggest that "Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's performance . . . as a pan-European white supremacist appears . . . as a strategy devised to enhance his and his government's "whiteness" credentials." Dace Dzenovska makes such a connection even more explicit when she posits that the defensive claim that there are just too many refugees or migrants for Europe to help operates both in the west and the east. In the former, however, in Sweden in particular, "too many" indexes infrastructural capacity, while in the east it is, as Dzenovska calls it, a substantive claim, that the type of people which one fears to have too many of to exceed a safe minority status.

Finally, another modality of relationality can be demonstrated even without the need to establish transnational linkages, well within the domestic context, as exemplified by Jessica Greenberg and Ivana Spasić's article. Rather than separating out refugee and asylum politics from a Bourdieusian understanding of politics as a field of practice, they show that the migrant crisis and responses to it by politicians, authorities, and activists are embedded in the same field of political practice. This means that activist initiatives or full-blown social movements that take issue with the Serbian state's incapacity, incompetence, and corruptibility end up extending to migrant assistance. Much like the Occupy Movement, these groups create capacity, competence and compassion where previously there had been none. As such, they not

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West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (May 2010): 179–221. In a way, an earlier debate critical forum on Ukraine on the pages of this journal can also be seen as part of this epistemological endeavor (*Slavic Review* 74, 4). Whether we agree with Timothy Snyder's use of the colonial/postcolonial conceptual apparatus ("Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 [Winter 2015]: 695–707), it too was made in the spirit of exploring relations rather than comparing (a methodological move that usually presupposes a good measure of independence of the units compared). I consider applications of coloniality to eastern Europe in whatever variety, one subset of relationality-type arguments (Zsuzsa Gille, "Is There a Global Postsocialist Condition?," *Global Society*, 24, No. 1 [January 2010]: 9–30.)

16. Note this is not the same argument as claiming the existence of some universal trend or phenomenon of which, let us say, German and Serbian responses are particular manifestations.

only create synergies among different issues but, more importantly, establish new forms of sociality. We close our Critical Forum on the note of hope that connecting the troubles of displaced people with those of Serbs or Hungarians will also overwrite the categories of difference and practices of exclusion that resulted in such a shameful performance by Europeans—whether in the east or the west.