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Caught Between 1945 and 1989:
Collective Memory and the Rise of Illiberal Democracy in Postcommunist Europe

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Abstract
Thirty years after 1989 Europe is once again divided despite 15 years of integration within the European Union. In contrast to the West's liberal conception of internationally constrained democracy rooted in the protection of individual and minority rights, Central Europe has developed an illiberal version centered on the popular sovereignty of the nation. I argue that these divergent understandings of democracy and the nation-state are rooted in collective memory. Whereas the West's historical imaginary is based on the traumas of Nazism associated with 1945, Central Europe's is dominated by the legacy of communism signified by 1989. These differing understandings of past teach strikingly different lessons for the present: one focused on the dangers of nationalism, the other on protecting national self-determination from external interference. The future of the EU depends on its ability create a common historical narrative that incorporates the lessons of the traumas of 1945 and 1989.

Keywords
Central Europe, Collective Memory, Democracy, European Union, Illiberalism, Postcommunism

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Introduction

The revolutions of 1989 seemingly signalled the victory of liberal democratic capitalism in Europe after 45 years of division. The states of Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*), which Milan Kundera famously referred to as the 'kidnapped West' (1984), abducted from their western heritage by the Red Army at the end of World War II, quickly adopted political, legal, and economic reforms based on the Western model after the fall of communism. In confirmation of the apparent success of these developments, a mere fifteen years later the first postcommunist states from this region were celebrating their accession to the European Union (EU). As of May 1, 2004, the reunification of Europe seemed complete.

Roughly another quarter century after that milestone, this initial narrative of accession seems hopelessly naïve and Panglossian. Instead of reflecting further political integration and economic convergence, on the 30th anniversary of 1989 Europe is once again divided. Although EU membership was supposed make the border between Western and Central Europe into a historical relic, fifteen years after the first enlargement into the postcommunist space the divisions of the Iron Curtain are still salient, as the states on either side of that symbolic barrier continue operate with differing understandings of democracy and opposing views of the role and value of the nation-state.

In contrast to the liberal democracies of postwar Western Europe, which protect individual rights and favour the rule of law over national sovereignty, the states of postcommunist Europe have developed a system of 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria, 1997). This alternate approach emphasizes the popular sovereignty of the nation over external claims to protection based on universal human rights, legal procedure, and international law. Additionally, whereas the former privilege the neutral state and support the delegation of national powers to supranational

organizations like the EU, the latter emphasise the importance of the nation within what Charles De Gaulle famously referred to as an '*Europe des patries*.'

This bifurcation is visible on many levels. Although illiberal parties and nationalist movements have also gained strength in parts of Western Europe as well – including within 'the Six' original members of the European Communities (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Luxembourg, and Belgium), which form the basis for my treatment of 'the West' – they have succeeded in both taking and consolidating power in large parts of the postcommunist region. Led by Victor Orbán's *Fidesz* and Jaroslaw Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) parties, a new, increasingly visible 'axis of illiberalism' (Vezjak, 2018) has formed around the so-called Visegrád Group. In my consideration of the dynamics of Central European or postcommunist regimes of collective memory, I focus on the members of this cluster, which is comprised of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia (i.e., the Czech Republic).

Orbán's Hungary and Kaczyński's Poland, which I use as my core examples of postcommunist illiberal democracies, have worked hard to avoid the 'evok[ing] the images familiar from twentieth century dictatorships' (Müller, 2018) by maintaining the electoral trappings of popular legitimacy. Instead of resorting to outright repression, they have secured their rule through gerrymandering, the manipulation of electoral rules, the neutering of the judiciary, and the takeover of the media by tycoons friendly to the regime. Insodoing, they have sought to create a broader movement, by creating a playbook for the leaders of illiberal movements other parts of the postcommunist region (for the example of Slovenia, see Walker 2020). This approach to democracy, which stresses the general will of the republican majority over the liberal protection of rights, is the mirror image of that held on the western half of the continent, which seeks to protect the status of individuals and groups both at the domestic level

via constitutionally embedded bills of rights and supranationally through international law and organisations, such as the EU and the Council of Europe (Meunier & Vachudova, 2018).

These differing understandings of both democracy and of the value of the nation-state in the post-Cold War international system became especially salient in 2015 as a result of the increasing influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. Coming on the heels of the Great Recession of 2008, this supposed 'invasion' fuelled right-wing populism across the continent. However, whereas governments in the West defend liberal ideals – at least in principle – despite a populist backlash by upholding the international right to asylum and proposing quotas for the distribution of asylum-seekers at the European level, postcommunist states generally responded by tightening asylum laws, rejecting refugee resettlement arrangements, erecting barbed wire fences, and in some cases even criminalizing assistance to refugees.

The differing understandings of democracy and the nation-state that have developed since 1989 pose a puzzle for our understanding of democratic consolidation. In order to understand these trends, I argue that we need to pay attention not only to economic and cultural factors – i.e. to the 'left behind' and the 'losers of globalization' (Inglehart & Norris, 2017) – but also to the cultures of collective memory that shape how individuals view the present through the prism of narratives of identity organised around key historical ruptures (Verovšek, 2020a). While the historical imaginary of Western Europe continues to be defined by the atrocities of the Holocaust and the defeat of fascism in 1945, regimes of remembrance across Central Europe are dominated instead by the fall of communism in 1989 (see Maier, 2002; Judt, 2005).

These divergent frameworks of collective memory bring strikingly different lessons to bear on the present. For Western Europeans, the remembrance of 1945 serve as evidence that nationalism and the failure to protect individual rights is the primary danger to both peace and

democracy. By contrast, for Central Europeans 1989 represents a repudiation of communism as a system imposed by external powers (i.e., the Soviet Union and the Communist Party), not of nationalism and national sovereignty. It therefore serves as the basis for resisting outside interference in domestic affairs. Since the accession of the first postcommunist states to the EU in 2004 these differing memory cultures have 'become a catalyst for debates about the communist past and for memory politics in both the new EU member states and their neighbours' (Zhurzhenko, 2007).

My argument is not that these differing memory cultures explain the divergences between Western and Central Europe on their own. Economic and cultural factors also play a role, as does the West's attempt to impose its political system and on the states of postcommunist Europe (Krastev & Holmes, 2018). This perspective is also not meant to deny the important internal disagreements within these regions. Instead, I contend that the divergent cultures of memory that arise from these differing narrative frameworks continue to affect politics by framing how democracy and the place of the nation-state in contemporary politics are interpreted (Verovšek, 2020b).

Methodologically, these divergent frameworks of collective memory function as 'ideal types' (Weber 1949) that lend greater interpretative understanding (*Verstehen*) of how individuals and the communities they form give different meaning to events. My main goal is not to provide a detailed overview of the complicated politics of memory in Europe (see Lebow et al., 2006; Pakier & Stråth, 2010); instead, I seek to draw attention to how politics in the present is affected by how political communities use backwards-looking narratives of remembrance – their 'space of experience,' in the words of Reinhart Koselleck (1985: 255-76) – to define their forward-looking 'horizons of expectation.' My basic thesis is that the differing memory cultures

in these two regions help to explain why the West emphasizes the liberal protection of rights by a neutral, internationally embedded state, whereas postcommunist Europe emphasizes majoritarian voting and national sovereignty.

The argument is organised as follows. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of collective remembrance and apply this framework to Western and Central Europe. I then demonstrate how these divergent understandings of the past produce significantly different policy responses using the example of the refugee crisis of 2015. I conclude that the future of a unified Europe depend on the ability of the EU to mediate these divides through the creation of a common historical framework that does not silence one perspective in favour of the other (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010), but which instead can mediate between these narratives by incorporating both the lessons of 1945 and of 1989.

Differing Memory Cultures

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century the humanities and the social sciences have experienced a 'memory boom' (Blight, 2009), as issues of remembrance have increasingly gained recognition as a key factor in social and political life (Verovšek 2016). The concept of collective memory originates in the work of the Maurice Halbwachs. Based on his observations of interwar Europe, he argued that it is impossible to separate individual from collective remembrance: 'It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories' (1992: 38). Halbwachs argues that individual identities are not only socially rediscovered (*retrouvée*); they are also socially reconstructed (*reconstruite*).

These dynamics give memory a fundamental and irreducibly communal character. Collective memory plays a crucial role in defining the reference points that shape the selection

and interpretation of the formative occurrences that define how the past and the future are socially reconstructed in the present. Furthermore, individual life histories and communal narratives of the past do not give equal weight to all events. On the contrary, collective remembrance is marked by a distinctive temporality. Unlike linear time, memory is multileveled and subject to different rates of acceleration and deceleration. It endows certain events with particular and repeated meaning while silencing or forgetting others (Spiegel, 2002). Socio-cultural frameworks of memory play a crucial role in this process (Misztal, 2005).

Collective remembrance is typically a conservative force, helping to stabilize individual stories within established frameworks of collective memory. However, certain moments in the history of a community – usually defined by violent, traumatic events (Edkins 2003; Alexander, 2004) – have the potential to break apart existing narratives, thus opening the space for shifts in the basic narrative frameworks of memory (Verovšek, 2020a). By interrupting the flow of linear time, these experiences break through the minutiae of everyday life. Unlike 'everyday events,' these 'authentic experiences' help individuals link their communal experiences of the past to visions of the future (Benjamin, 1977: 159). Often represented by symbolic dates such as 1945 and 1989 they are formed into new narratives, which become the 'key to what lies both upstream and downstream' (Furet, 1981: 3).

Such narrative regimes are never static or fully unitary: dominant memory cultures invariably generate 'counter-memories' and paradigm shifts are always contested (Foucault, 1977). However, they are also asymmetrical in the sense that political leaders 'most directly articulate and seek to institutionalize [these] conceptions' (Smith, 2003: 32). In this sense, collective memories and the stories they underpin 'must be imagined into being' (Alexander, 2012: 3). The social theorist Jeffrey Alexander notes that the transformation in individual

experiences into 'shared trauma depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation.' Despite their grounding in actual events, the narratives that organize collective memory are not spontaneously generated; instead, they are created and spread by memory entrepreneurs who act as 'collective agents of the trauma process' or 'carrier groups' (Alexander, 2012: 16). These dynamics play an important role within the EU (Pakier & Stråth, 2010; Verovšek 2020b) and in world politics more generally (Bell, 2006).

The differing frameworks of collective memory in Western and postcommunist Europe help to explain their divergent understandings of democracy and the nation-state. In Western Europe collective remembrance is shaped by the traumatic events of the Second World War, culminating in the victory over fascism in 1945. Immediately following the end of the war, key political leaders, including Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Alcide de Gasperi, argued that rampant nationalism had led Europe into two World Wars and the atrocities that occurred as a result (see Verovšek, 2020b). As a result, in Schuman's words, the leaders of western Europe agreed that 'renouncing sovereign rights…[is] the only means with which we can overcome national egoisms, antagonisms and the narrowness that is killing us' (quoted in Christnacker, 1975: 37).

This conclusion – which was shared by major political leaders parties across western Europe after World War II – had important consequences for the development of postwar democracy. Although popular sovereignty is still important in Western Europe, the lessons of 1945 showed that that the will of the people could only function properly within a 'constrained democracy' (Schupmann, 2017: 201-20) that protected individual and group rights by enshrining them outside the sphere of majoritarian parliamentary politics. The postwar liberal-democratic order in western Europe thus sought to ensure that nation-states could not deploy national law to

'kill the juridical person' (Snyder & Lisjak Gabrijelčič, 2016) by taking away basic rights from unwanted individuals and minorities, the legal steps that paved the way for both the refugee crisis of the interwar years and the atrocities of the Holocaust.

In addition to its effects on the development of democracy at the domestic level – which was characterized by the passage of bills of rights designed to protect basic liberties from electoral deterioration – the lessons of 1945 also have important implications for the relationship between democracy and the nation-state. Since they did not trust the state to protected the rights of unwanted minorities, the leaders of postwar Western Europe sought 'to invent new forms of political life in Europe after the murderous wars of the early twentieth century' (Guisan, 2012: 3). The fear of nationalism led to the foundation of the first European community, the European Coal and Steel Community, which not only sought to 'make war unthinkable' through greater political cooperation, but also 'materially impossible' through the development of economic and political integration. This project had a legal dimension as well. For example, the development of European law, which takes precedence over domestic legal codes due to the doctrine of supremacy, is designed to protect human rights across the continent as a whole. In addition to the EU, both the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights seek ensure the protection of the rights of persecuted individuals by giving them legal standing to report and sue their states for rights violations (Wilson, 2018).

These legal, constitutional, and political developments are rooted in the shared trauma created by the experience of two World Wars and the Holocaust. In their postwar arguments for these measures politicians, writers, and other memory entrepreneurs repeatedly emphasize that 'the imperative of developing new, supranational forms of cooperation after the Second World War' is rooted in the experience of trauma that had 'entangled all European nations in bloody

conflicts' (Habermas & Derrida, 2003: 296). Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, this collective memory was disseminated through the development of countless memorials and other 'places of memory' (Nora, 1984) designed to remind individuals of the lessons of 1945 and teach them to the next generation. As a result, it is possible to speak of the Holocaust as 'the European entry ticket' (Judt, 2005: 803), as the *sine qua non* of European identity for the western part of the continent.

Collective memories on the other side of the Iron Curtain developed very differently. While 1945 is an important symbolic date in Central Europe, for these societies it represents 'a transition from one occupation to another: from Nazi rule to Soviet rule' (Snyder, 2005). Whereas the Western narrative is one of liberation, postcommunist Europe experienced the end of the Second World War as a renewed occupation and loss of national sovereignty. In contrast to the centrality of fascism and the Holocaust in Western Europe's historical imaginary, 'the legacy of communism…[is] the most defining phenomenon of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century' (Wójcik & Kubik, 2017).

The centrality of 1989 in the memory cultures of Central Europe has important consequences for understandings of democracy and of the value of the nation-state in this region. Unlike in the West, where the spectre of 1945 acts as a reminder of the dangers involved in denying individuals and minorities certain fundamental human rights, the lessons of 1989 are less about rights protection and more about the importance of self-government and the repudiation of external interference in domestic affairs. This is not to say that the communist regimes in the east did not violate the civic and political rights of their inhabitants; of course they did. However, in the collective memory regimes of postcommunist Europe these violations were perceived and generally associated with the Soviet Union's interventions in the internal affairs of

its satellite states, represented most paradigmatically – and traumatically for the citizens of these countries – by the iconic photographs of Soviet Red Army tanks driving down the streets of Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968 (Rupnik, 2017).

As a result of this framework of collective memory, in Central Europe 'communism was associated with national enslavement' (Smolar & Potocka, 2001: 16). The postcommunist region's aim in throwing off the yoke of the Warsaw Pact was therefore not the liberal protection of human rights based on the equality of all citizens, but 'self-government by virtuous republican citizens' (2001: 12). This desire for self-rule is hardly new; on the contrary, it is the result of long-standing traumatic memories of empire, invasion, partition and occupation going back hundreds of years. In 1946 István Bibó located 'The Miseries of East European Small States,' including his native Hungary, in the ever-present fear of interference by outside powers, which he argued 'was the decisive factor in making democracy waver in these countries' (2015: 151). Similarly, Kundera (1984) notes that the desire of external actors to exert their will on these small, permanently endangered nations is the 'reason that, in the European memory, these countries always seem to be the source of dangerous troubles.'

This interpretation of communism as a form of external control that violates the popular sovereignty of the nation has important implications for Central European understandings of the national state. In contrast to the multiculturalism promoted by the west, the states of Central Europe largely retained an understanding of the nation rooted in the nineteenth century German ideal of a 'culture-based nation' (*Kulturnation*) defined by language, culture, and religion (Rupnik, 2016). As a result, the transitional democracies created in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall found the multicultural values of the EU to be at odds with the postcommunist *Zeitgeist*.

Given that communism itself is a global movement that operates 'independently of all nationality' – as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously argue in the 'Communist Manifesto' – it is perhaps understandable that a backlash against its imposition from the outside would result in a renewed emphasis not only on *popular*, but also *national* sovereignty. The fact that many of the nations of Central Europe achieved statehood during the interwar period (and in some cases even during Nazi occupation) before they were folded into the Soviet sphere of influence, only reinforces this trend by allowing them to maintain collective memories of democratic self-government at the national level (Lašas, 2008). The uncomfortable history of many of these Quisling regimes, which often collaborated with the Nazis to deport Jews, minorities and other unwanted individuals to concentration and death camps, is forgotten or silenced in these narratives, which look back on these periods of pre-Cold War independence as precursors of post-1989 national sovereignty.

Just as memory entrepreneurs in the West helped to shape the lessons of 1945 by emphasizing the liberal protection of rights and the importance of the universalistic state over the particularistic nature of the nation, the postcommunist narrative has also been disseminated and institutionalized by important carrier groups within these societies that had 'grown disillusioned with liberal democracy…long before the current illiberal wave' (Buzogány & Varga, 2018: 811). This is true of the leaders of both Hungary and Poland, my two representative case studies. Since coming to power both Orbán and Kaczyński have sought to institutionalize their vision by building on their understanding of the past and of the meaning of 1989. Their approach emphasizes the importance of the nation and of national sovereignty by creating narratives that treat history as a series of disasters imposed by external powers. Insodoing, they downplay the

importance of protecting liberal rights and embedding the state within the international system in favour of a story that emphasizes the need for non-interference and national self-rule.

For example, Orbán's politics of memory focuses on the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which gave large portions of the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to neighbouring states (Romania and Ukraine, as well as the newly formed states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) after World War I. This story of Western betrayal builds on the narrative propagated by the interwar leader of Hungary, Miklós Horthy, who sought to legitimize his rule by blaming the Entente for these developments. It also served to excuse Horthy's dalliances with Hitler and Mussolini, since these alliances enabled the recovery of some parts of these 'lost' territories. Today the signing of this treaty – and of Hungarian national resistance more generally – is remembered on National Unity Day (June 4). Orbán's government has also passed a law offering citizenship to Hungarian speaking descendants of nationals who lived in the country before 1920 (Toomey, 2018).

Orbán has also sought to root Hungary's national identity deeply in the European history of Christianity, a historical imaginary that silences the period of communist rule in its entirety. The 'National Avowal' contained within Hungary's new constitution of April 2011 locates the nation's founding in the mythical actions of Saint Stephen and expresses pride in the fact that the Hungarian 'people has over the centuries defended Europe in a series of struggles' against Islam in the guise of the Ottoman Empire (quoted in Verovšek 2019). This rooting of a 'story of peoplehood' (Smith, 2003) in medieval history allows Orbán to deemphasize the recent past by presenting the revolution 1989 as a return to an older tradition of divinely ordained self-rule (Buzogány & Varga, 2018). He has even sought to replace recent history with myth by removing

statues of Hungarians associated with communism, including the philosopher and opponent of Soviet Marxism, György Lukács, and the leader of the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, Imre Nagy.

These moves help to sediment the notion that communism was a foreign imposition, thus allowing Orbán to argue that the system of liberal democracy is just another attempt by foreign powers – the EU and western Europe, in this case – exert external control over Hungary. During the Cold War, much of the country felt that 'the Communist Party in Hungary was no party but a mechanism for executing the will of the Central Committee, and thus the will of Moscow.' Agnes Heller (2019: 2, 4) points out Orbán's resistance to the EU today builds on this background, as he is able to draw an implicit parallel between Moscow and Brussels by emphasizing that the 'Hungarian government is not subjected to command or control from outside.' This gives Orbán the veneer of democratic legitimacy, even as he assaults the ability of the people to influence the decisions he makes by ensuring that they 'were and remained subjects, not citizens.'

This narrative of liberation from external influence has enabled Orbán to develop his own conception of Europe based on the 'decoupling of liberalism and democracy' (Rupnik, 2016: 83-4). In this understanding, Hungary and the rest of Central Europe stand on 'ramparts of Christianity' (*antemurale christianitatis*), fighting to save European civilization from both the threats of Islam in the south and of multiculturalism and liberalism in the west (Betts, 2019: 285-8). While the project of supranational integration in the West is also deeply rooted in the theology of 'personalism' that underpinned postwar Christian Democracy in the 1950s and 60s, this religious influence has declined precipitously in the West in recent decades with the onset of ever-greater secularization and multiculturalism (Nelson & Guth, 2015).

Kaczyński's Poland is engaged in a similar enterprise. However, instead of merely downplaying or engaging in practices of active forgetting, the Law and Justice party instead paints itself as a successor to both the wartime resistance and the underground opposition to communism. As part of this agenda, it has sought to rehabilitate the anti-Soviet partisans who fought against the Stalinist domination of Poland until the mid-1950s. The regime has even set up a new holiday in their honour, despite the fact that many of these fighters were also responsible for atrocities carried out against Belarusians and Jews returning to Poland after the war (Zerofsky, 2018). As part of this project of projecting a Christian, rural vision of the nation as the authentic expression of Polishness, in June 2019 the government chose to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the 1979 pilgrimage of Polish Pope John Paul II to his homeland rather than the 30th anniversary of the solidarity movement that set off the revolutions of 1989.

In a particularly brazen attempt to reshape collective remembrance, in 2018 the Polish parliament also passed a memory law that imposes a jail sentence of up to three years for anyone who 'accuses, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the German Third Reich...or any other war crimes, crimes against humanity or crimes against peace' (in *Economist*, 2018). In outlawing the use of phrases such as 'Polish death camps,' President Andrzej Duda noted that the bill seeks to ensure both Poland's 'dignity and historical truth.' Although parliament watered down the law and reclassified violations as a civil, not a criminal offence due to international pressure, the fact that it was even passed in the first place says a lot about how collective memories of communism continue to influence how Poland and other states in postcommunist Europe view democracy (Verovšek, 2019). Although such interventions in collective remembrance fetishize the past, it is not the actual past that is fetishized, as historical research has established beyond any doubt that

'ordinary men' (Browning, 2001) from Poland played a key role in the atrocities of the Holocaust.

These differing understandings of democracy and of the nation-state that have taken root in Western and Central Europe as a result of the different cultural traumas that prevail in these two regions are not merely of academic interest or scholarly import (Edkins, 2003). On the contrary, they have given rise to a number of important policy disagreements since the first member-states from postcommunist Europe acceded to the EU in 2004. While these issues have been percolating ever since, they broke out into the open in 2015 when higher numbers of refugees from the Middle East and Africa began to migrate over the borders of the EU.

Migration and Memory Disputes

In 2015 the largest movement of refugees in Europe since the end of World War II, following closely on the heels of the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression of the interwar years, further destabilised the EU. Generally speaking, the states of the West reacted to this situation rather differently from the postcommunist states of Central Europe. Whereas the former sought to uphold the rights of these refugees to claim asylum, however reluctantly, the latter responded more harshly with a number of policy measures, including the erection of barriers and the criminalisation of assistance to migrants. Although the 'core' EU member-states of the West have taken a harder line since the beginning of the refugee crisis following a populist electoral backlash from the far right (Rensmann 2017; 2018), they have still defended the theoretical right to asylum and have sought to find supranational solutions by proposing arrangements for refugee resettlement. By applying my theoretical framework to this case, I argue that these differing responses are conditioned by disagreements over the meaning of

democracy and the nation-state based on the differing memory cultures that prevail along frontier previously defined by the Iron Curtain.

In her study of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951: 277, 275, 299), Hannah Arendt devotes considerable attention to the issue of migrants, refugees, and stateless people, who she refers to as 'the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.' She argues that the political difficulties posed by refugees highlights to a fundamental tension within the hyphenated concept of the nation-state itself. Whereas the first term of this unstable hybrid points to the importance of ethnic belonging by emphasizing the special status of co-nationals, the latter focuses on the universal ideal of the rule of law, which ought to apply equally to all, regardless of citizenship or nationality. The denationalization of minorities and the persecution of refugees more generally – both of which were core features of the politics of the newly created nation-states of Central Europe in the interwar years – is a signal that the 'nation ha[s] conquered the state,' i.e. that the popular will of the dominant, prepolitical majority has sought to repress the civil, human rights of minorities and other outsiders. Arendt was particularly worried about this development, since privileging the nation based on popular sovereignty meant that individuals and 'unwanted' groups could be killed or otherwise ejected from the body politic 'quite democratically – namely by majority decision.'

Arendt's analysis – which has been backed up by subsequent scholarship (Adelman, 2016; Snyder & Lisjak Gabrijelčič, 2016) - helps to shed light on the difficulties the EU has had in developing a unified policy to confront the challenges posed by the refugee crisis. On the one hand, in the Western European understanding, the international right of migrants to claim asylum under the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951, updated 1967) is one of the key developments of the postwar liberal order. This agreement was designed specifically to prevent a

repeat of the events of the interwar period, when forced migration was used as both a mechanism of ethnic cleansing and as a way to destabilize neighbouring states by flooding them with waves of stateless people whose property had been seized and who thus had no way to support themselves (Kerber 2007). Although the right to asylum is rooted in national law across the continent, the fact the Convention allowed these individuals to assert their rights as 'persons in need of international protection' made their claims more difficult for Western states to ignore given the lessons of 1945. At the European level, the desire – fragile though it may be – to live up to international legal obligations is also visible in the attempts by these member-states to implement EU-wide quotas for the resettlement of asylum-seekers (Hann, 2015: 1-2).

Western Europe's desire to welcome immigrants has hardly been uniform. In particular, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's open door policy, which led to the immigration of one million refugees in 2015, has proved to be very unpopular, especially within the former German Democratic Republic. This reaction in the postcommunist region shows that 'there are unmastered authoritarian politico-cultural legacies among segments of the East German electorate who are not at ease with Western, liberal-democratic immigrant society' (Rensmann, 2018: 55). This reaction makes sense, as this section of the German electorate is responding to the lessons of 1989, not of 1945.

Much like the citizens of East Germany, the postcommunist Visegrád Group has also pushed back against Western attempts to protect asylum rights and redistribute refugees across the continent. In fact, the EU recently had to abandon its quotas for the resettlement of asylum-seekers across its member-states, due to what Donald Tusk referred to as a split 'between east and west…compounded by emotions which make it hard to find common language' (BBC, 2017). Building on the lessons of 1989, representatives from Central Europe have repeatedly

Western calls for solidarity, arguing instead that they have a right to make their own decisions at the national level and to protect their cultures from 'being "overrun" by an "other"' (Mälksoo, 2019: 368). Although the EU is seeking alternative ways of dealing with the crisis, its internal divisions over how democracy should be interpreted and over the proper place of the nation-state in contemporary international politics makes reaching such agreement difficult.

From a Western perspective, it is easy to blame Central Europe for holding on to an outdated and perhaps even dangerous conception of democracy rooted in nationalism and the nation-state. However, while there is truth to this accusation, such a narrative also threatens to disrespect the historical experiences and collective memories of postcommunist Europe. Despite their feelings of guilt for abandoning Central Europe to the Soviets at Yalta (see Lašas, 2008) and their subsequent commitment to integrating the postcommunist region into the EU as a result, many in the West have found it difficult understand the importance of 1989 to the postcommunist historical imaginary (see Conquest, 2000: xi; Maier, 2002). In a particularly poignant example, these divisions broke into the open at the Leipzig Book Fair in March 2004, just before the first postcommunist states were to accede to the EU in May. At this event, Latvian politician and future European Commissioner Sandra Kalniete, argued that 'the two totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Communism – were equally criminal.' Her speech caused an uproar, as commentators in on the western half of the continent accused her of making an 'illegal comparison,' of 'downgrading the Holocaust' and of 'anti-Semitism' (quoted in Troebst, 2010: 60).

Since the accession of the new member-states from Central Europe debates over the meaning of the communist past vis-à-vis the legacy of National Socialism have also played themselves out within the institutions of the EU. For example, in 2005 the European Parliament

(EP) debated a proposal that would have extended the German ban on Nazi symbols like the swastika throughout the EU. During the debate, Hungarian MEP (Member of European Parliament) Jozsef Szájer agreed with the German proposal, but argued that if 'the Union wishes to propose a ban on the swastika, I suggest adding the symbols of the hated and bloody communist dictatorship as well. […] No more Nazism in Europe, no more communism in Europe!' (quoted in European Parliament, 2005). This suggestion produced a heated response, especially among Western social democrats, who see these 'symbols of the hated and bloody communist dictatorship' as markers of an socialist ideal of emancipation untainted by actually existing communism (see Verovšek, 2015).

Since the uproar surrounding the debate on the banning of the swastika, the EP has worked hard to create a more capacious framework for European memory at the transnational level by recognizing and emphasizing the evils of communism alongside those of Nazism. A series hearing and conferences organized by the European Commission (European Commission, 2010: 6) and the Slovenian Presidency of the EU 'brought to light a strong feeling that the Member States in Western Europe should be more aware of the tragic past of the Member States in Eastern Europe.' In its declaration on 'European conscience and totalitarianism' (European Parliament, 2009: §K), the EP argued that 'Europe will not be united unless it is able to form a common view of its history, recognizes Nazism, Stalinism and fascist and Communist regimes as a common legacy and brings about an honest and thorough debate on their crimes in the past century.' Although the EU has taken some steps toward 'the creation of a European memory culture,' it is important to remember that this 'does not necessarily imply the erasure of national and local forms of remembrance' (Sierp, 2017, 3). Subsequent declarations (European Parliament, 2019) have also concluded that Europe will be unable to overcome its internal

divisions until it develops a unified framework of collective memory that can integrate both the lessons of 1945 and 1989.

Conclusion

My basic thesis is that the increasing political divergence between Western and Central Europe, which is particularly visible in their responses to the migration crisis of 2015, is rooted in the fact that the memory cultures in these two regions are organized around different historical ruptures, which are represented by the symbolic dates of 1945 and 1989. These differing understandings of democracy replicate an older division between the liberal and republican traditions within legal and political philosophy (Habermas, 1998: 239-252). While the former characterizes the relationship between the citizen and the state in a democracy as based on the state's recognition of negative rights that guarantee the citizen's freedom from compulsion, the latter understands this relationship in terms of a positive right to shape the law through participation in majoritarian elections.

These disagreements over what democracy entails are reinforced by opposing understandings of the role and value of the nation-state at the start of the twenty-first century. In the West, the focus on the lessons of 1945 leads to both a repudiation of nationalism and a focus on the state as a neutral purveyor of a universal form of law that treats all residents equally. By contrast, Central Europe's experience of oppression under Soviet internationalism has led the states of this region see their own freedom and self-determination as rooted in the culturally-, ethnically-, and linguistically-defined nation. The success of the Cold War era communist regimes in cleansing the states behind the Iron Curtain of minorities in the aftermath of World War II – many of whom fled to the west – also means that these states did not share Western Europe's postwar experience of multiculturalism (Lowe 2012). For them democracy means not

only *popular* sovereignty in the republican tradition of democracy, but *national* sovereignty rooted in the nation-state.

A greater appreciation for the importance of collective memory in shaping politics in the present also has important implications for international development and attempts to consolidate democracy around the world. The difficulties the EU has experienced in spreading its understanding of liberal democracy to Central Europe – a region which despite its differing experience of the postwar period, still much of the European historical legacy of Christianity, the Enlightenment and nationalism (Nelson & Guth, 2015) – puts attempts by the West writ large to export its political systems globally in a very different light. Most notably, paying attention to the importance of history and memory in the consolidation of democracy might help development agencies to realize that the very term democracy will mean different things to different people because of their different historical backgrounds.

Intra-European conflicts over what the role and value of the unstable concept of the nation-state is in this process also raise questions about the West's attempts to impose the nation-state on other parts of the world. It may well be that the prevalence of so-called 'failed states' in Africa – as well as the difficulties of implanting democracies within them – not rooted internally within these societies, but in the very attempt to impose these Western structures on areas to which they are not suited (Flickschuh, 2017). Paying more attention to the role that memory cultures play in shaping how individuals and communities interpret and respond to important political ideas therefore has important, understudied implications for international development, as well as for social and political research more generally.

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