Full Length Article

Provincializing European responses to the refugee 'crisis' through a Hungarian lens

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A B S T R A C T

This paper engages with state, citizen, and civil society responses to refugees in Budapest and Hungary more widely in order to 'provincialise' European migration policy and politics. We introduce grounded, eastern 'frontline' realities and histories to complicate European claims to universality and hierarchies of "goodness". Through ethnographic work that documents and analyses refugee reception after the so-called 2015 refugee crisis, we shed light on the diverse forms of existing crises affecting the EU. These conflicts involve contestations over i) who is deemed European (questions that have been asked both of migrants and East Europeans), and ii) the 'Europeanisation' project as it has entailed new governance and funding arrangements for the development of civil society organisations. These new governance modes have attempted to re-shape city-state-EU dynamics, purposefully eliding problematic nation-state responses to refugees. These have heightened opposition to EU power-creep from conservative governments. Through an empirically rich discussion of the Hungarian context in relation to Europe, this paper speaks to the broader spectrum of grounded and politicised populist responses that have challenged the EU's governance and future.

1. Introduction: situating 'Europe' and the refugee 'Crisis'

"*I insist that the unqualified "Europe" invoked as the core protagonist of coloniality contains societies whose experiences in the realm of colonial practices have been vastly varied—indeed quite contradictory. Some have been modern colonial metropoles, some have not. Some have been centers and/or peripheries of empires of various kinds, some have not. The complexity of the cross-European experience with empire and coloniality is daunting*" (Böröcz, 2001, p. 7).

This article examines the ways in which geo-political and historical fragmentation within Europe have become apparent in the state-led responses to the refugee 'crisis' since 2015. We accept that "the so-called 'migration crisis' has far more to do with the current state of the European Union … than it does about the realities of contemporary migration" (Crawley in McConnell et al., 2017, p. 265), and so position the issue of migration as one leveraged to fundamentally question and redefine the nature and landscapes of power in Europe. While the crises afflicting the EU include the financial crisis of the Eurozone, the Greek crisis, Crimea and Ukraine, Syria, and Brexit (Börzel, 2016) - media portrayals of refugees in 2015 captured and tugged at popular imaginations across Europe, and became a cause for the left *and* right of politics. One of the countries where these popular imaginaries converged dramatically with complex historical grievances, emergent

forms of right-populist politics, and expressed tensions with EU mandates concerning EU member states' responsibility towards migrants was Hungary.

Responses to the heightened numbers of refugees into the EU produced a constellation of reactions: from civil society formations responding to refugee arrivals, to city-wide campaigns to either deter or welcome, to contrasting refugee representations across social and news media on the partisan spectrum, to state legislation and new migration laws, to EU deals with geographically peripheral states on its borders. In this article, we argue that these reactions need to be contextualised within the differential histories and place-based logics that reflect the multiplicity of Europe. We focus on the geopolitically multi-scalar and temporal responses to refugees across the unlikely 'frontline' city of Budapest, where the migrant situation tested, and was used to (con)test, the competencies and sovereignties of European and nation-state institutions. These occurred in a broader context of rising Euroscepticism that ties into historical and perpetuated dissatisfactions around the European project.

The 'crisis' we interrogate in this article is not only one of governance, but also one of identity – not within the "imagined communities" notion of nation-states as such (Anderson, 1991) but rather of 'Europeanness' and the European project. As Dzenovska (2016) writes, "every crisis produces Europeanness anew: during the Greek economic crisis,

Greece refused to behave like a responsible economic subject," where "proper Europeans" (exemplified by Germany) both evaluated and set the standard. Through the migration 'crisis' Eastern European states refused to "play by proper European rules" such that they had to be "shamed into moral maturity and, by extension, agreeable politics" (Dzenovska, 2016). The Europe that struggles today with migration policies is one where not all members of the EU are deemed, or are in practice, equally 'European', and where the spectrum of 'welcome' versus 'hostility' towards migrants reflects historically contingent and differentiated interpretations of responsibility towards refugees, European belonging, and imagined futures. This paper aims to shed light on the complex ways in which particular member state polities bring differential historical grievances and experiences to the fore, that are bundled and manufactured to give rise to certain political affects. Our core intervention is in identifying these and questioning their consequences by focusing on the under-researched but recently politically 'loud' Hungarian context and example.

To do this, we critically engage with the narratives and objectives of 'right' or even avowedly illiberal populist politics, contextualising their grounded provenance and expression, and interrogating their political translation and use. Moralising and elitist hierarchies play a central part in the expression of populism through diverse 'ecologisms' (Lubarda, 2020), where analysis of actually-existing populism needs to relate the ways in which antagonisms "inflect with contextually hospitable 'full' ideologies" (Stanley, 2008). What is labelled 'populism' often has a place-based logic that does not necessarily echo official political discourses, where significant heterogeneity in what counts as 'populist' rhetoric is under-explored. Populism's forms are varied: in the humanitarian field, 'left-wing' ideologies foreground compassion and empathy as keystones to policy (Weiss, 2015), with expansive definitions of who consists of "the people". In contrast, populism of the 'right' has been termed "exclusive" in that it typically emphasises the need to demarcate and exclude those not a part of a presumed "original" or ethnic population (Weiss, 2015). 'Right-wing' populist tropes have, in much extant research on migration, been dismissed outright as problematic, born of ignorance and racism, while left-leaning narratives typically undergird researchers' own (unstated or implicit) liberal values. The latter approach may too quickly classify 'populism' along a left/right binary that leaves little room for a more nuanced historicised and contextualised reading of belief systems and practices. In this article, we consider the ways in which Eastern European vantages around their contemporary geopolitical and economic positionality and prospects in the EU are entangled with grounded perceptions of loss, place and disadvantage on behalf of "ordinary" people that "combine to produce certain political affects" (Bangstad et al., 2019, p. 103). We seek to embed the forms and expressions of populisms encountered at local levels to better grasp how these views have translated into formal political expression, and what they say about the relationships between the delineation of political 'sides' and the provenance of electoral support. Through our empirical work in Budapest, we also aim to consider the effects of arising hard consequences of widely shared populist views on civil society groups (as democracy from below) and the EU as a collective projection of 'liberal democracy' from above.

We align with Birey et al. (2019, pp. 1–2) who state that "bracketing a social and political event as a 'crisis' has an isolating effect, presenting it as out of the ordinary and disconnected from the context in which it emerged and developed". Indeed, Campani argues that "[t]he migration and refugee crisis is not a question of numbers: it is a question of 'narratives' that has to be understood in the framework of a global and European process of political, economic, social, and cultural transformation" (2018, p. 1). The framing of these narratives lead, in turn, to the potential production of societal fear - or fatalism - that may then be channelled and contested on multi-level political stages (Beuret et al., 2021). Alan Ingram argues for attention to geopolitical 'events' and how "things of all kinds come to act, interact, enact and alter each other in the course of intensive transformations" (2019, p. 166), to potentially

acquire place-based meaning and political significance. As we spotlight in this article, in the context of migration in Budapest, there have been a series of 'events' that took place in particular conjunctures, and produced particular effects: 'welcome' efforts, populist responses, and subsequent EU-, municipal, and civil society governance, whereby 'crackdowns' on Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) by states have been used to contest EU reach (of influence as well as concrete, formal power).

The paper's empirical material is drawn from a multi-sited collaborative study that focused on European cities' responses to migration. Between 2015 and 2019, we documented how aid and provisioning agencies and civil society groups attempted to work under a climate of "endless emergency" (Agier, 2016) with increasing financial, social and political pressures. In section two below, we introduce notions of different Europes and explore their relevance to migration, and discuss the European asylum process and contestations to the EU's 'democratic mandate'. Section three explores two acts in the chronology of European fragmentation that we have themed '(unwelcome) Arrival' and 'Tightening'. In the conclusion, we discuss the consequences of historically- and economically- founded contestations to the EU project. While the thinking and writing of this paper benefited from our multi-sited research approach and reflections, we focus on the "singularity" of a field site that called for a deepened consideration of its "specificity". We recognise that our analysis of the Hungarian context in relation to migration politics and contemporary responses "requires attention to historical difference" (Jazeel, 2019, p. 12). We have therefore resisted the temptation to give way to inter-European comparative geographies for reasons we hope will become clear throughout our paper, though the analysis benefits from thinking with Europe's multiplicities.

2. Denaturalising 'Europe' through migration, hierarchies and bordering

In a recent set of interventions in this journal, McConnell et al. (2017, p. 262) argued for a "renewed analytical toolbox" on Europe through three themes: borders, crises, and power. We engage with these by specifically aiming to provincialise or denaturalise Europe (Chakrabarty, 2007) through attention to how alternative historical perspectives on migration and Europe may illuminate the geopolitical (and sub-national) conflicts encountered by the liberal European project. Intra-EU contestations to EU decision-making and values highlights the ways in which the post-war 20th century European project was never singular, despite its claims to be a unified enterprise (Judt, 2011a).

In provincializing Europe as the "origin point of modernity" (Jeffrey in McConnell et al., 2017, p. 264), we recognise that any idea of 'Europe' is partial, where power relations must be foregrounded to highlight the significance of hierarchies between and within member states (Boatcă, 2010). Since 2015, the refugee issue mobilised a fundamental re-questioning of the core aims and workings of the EU, renewing historical divisions. This was made evident during the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, where Europe's handling of refugees was argued by several conservative leaders (notably Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Italy's Matteo Salvini, and Austria's then-Chancellor Sebastian Kunz) to determine the economic, political and cultural future of the continent (Erlanger, 2019; Point, 2019). Such convictions resulted in a new geopolitical alliance, the 'south-east axis' from Italy and Austria to Poland, including the Visegrád Four: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Czechia.

These dynamics are not new. Conservative politicians in particular often express cultural and resource concerns around the impacts of migration on domestic populations. As migration has become central to an increasingly populist politics around the world since 2015, liberal academic critiques of populist leaders' claims tend to overlook the extent to which these leaders represent and feed their publics' anxieties and views. Through our fieldwork across different capitals within Europe, we documented diverse responses to refugee arrivals, from

practices of solidarity and conviviality, to the complexities and contexts of expressions of intolerance (Thieme et al., 2020). The 'far right' tends to be "exoticised" and "othered" by researchers and academics (Pasieka, 2019), which makes the project of understanding societal divisions through differently held views difficult insofar as it dismisses viewpoints that are deemed unacceptable. However, positions deemed problematic by researchers often reveal existential or systemic concerns that are not confined to the 'far right' at all, and require attention precisely because they are borne from a range of factors – including alternative historical interpretations and emphases, community isolation and government messaging. The increasing preponderance of reactionary and populist views within many European societies also signify that they will not dissipate simply or easily with a new electoral cycle.

Our task here is by no means to excuse the origins and expression of xenophobic policies nor to equate southern and eastern European marginalisation with migrants' experiences of hostile, violent and racialised borders. Rather, we seek to situate the spectrum of responses to refugee arrivals within uneven European historical and contemporary geographies; and, to acknowledge that those who are most reticent to migration have, in some cases, also been subject to degrees of exclusion and perceptions of loss. This is a fraught project, as recent experiences or internalisations of socio-economic marginality stemming from globalisation or the European project cannot excuse historically embedded origins of racism and racialisation of migrants (the contrast between Eastern European responses to (most) Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and the period we document in this paper is a case in point). We do not wish to excuse racist responses even if we try to explore these responses' origins, and their societal normalisations. We argue that doing so, albeit with the discomfort that it assumes, is in itself an important part of a progressive politics and lateral research practice.

The discussion below proceeds in two parts: we first discuss the ways in which 'multiple Europes' have been theoretically understood and maintained; second, we turn to how refugees and CSOs have challenged the European project in practice.

2.1. Orientalism and hierarchies in Europe

Similar to depictions of capitalist world-systems as inevitable, universal and ahistorical (Wolf, 1982), the accession of Eastern European states to the EU was depicted as a victory for capitalism, and as an outcome of European superiority (in terms of economic and democratic model and values). Aimé Césaire's essay *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955, 2000) called out European pretences of "civilisation" and "benevolence" by describing Europe's very project as "indefensible." Yet, the narrative of (Western) Europe as "eternally good" persisted throughout its colonial project, and into the late 20th century under the third-worlding guise of 'development' (Escobar, 2011). These relative hierarchies were also produced in relation to west Europe's eastern counterparts, where the latter's 20th century socialist forms of government and life were regarded as "bad" (Melegh, 2012), primarily because they too (like the 'developing' world) did not follow principles of modernisation. Such depictions are part and parcel of a "grand illusion" (Judt, 2011b) that have come under significant post-colonial contestation, echoing mid-20th century anti-colonial critiques. József Böröcz argues that empire and coloniality are essential tools to understand the "empirical phenomenon" that became, in 2004, the eastern enlargement of the European Union, where supposed universal European values are merely, deliberately, a "*synecdoche* representation" (Böröcz, 2001, p. 8).

The post-socialist period has now consisted of almost two decades of EU 'integration' on terms that are frequently politically and economically disadvantageous to newer members (see Kuus, 2007, 2004), with asymmetries in power and dependence in favour of Western Europe (Böröcz, 2000). Old political alliances and the needs of Western corporations have seen democracy undermined by strong EU members in weaker states. Consider, for example, the power of financial institutions ('triad') over democratic will in Greece (Pogátsa, 2014; Stubbs, 2018),

or the reprimands over serious democratic 'backsliding' and rule-of-law breaches received by Hungary and Poland (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). At the same time, enormous investments continue into these same countries' labour markets by Western firms (notably German automobile companies), who see Eastern Europe as 21st century 'frontier' markets for cheaper manufacturing opportunities. These contradictions (between a politics that speaks out against seemingly undemocratic regimes but invests in those labour markets anyway) have given rise to a conflicting domestic response politics in 'peripheral' EU members that both welcome Western economic investment *and* complain of uneven political critique. Post-socialist states' discontent also arguably stems from the imposition of institutions and legislation linked to their EU accession, which were not "deliberated upon and built, as much as imported and adopted wholesale resulting in a double democratic deficit – double because national democracy did not even have a chance to realise [domestically]" (Gille, 2004, pp. 3–4).

Before we return to questions of the EU's democratic deficit, we briefly explore the perceived hierarchies within Europe. Drawing from Partha Chaterjee, Böröcz (2006) outlines a "moral geopolitics" of the European Union that is a "rule of European difference." This establishes a "west European moral authority" (Böröcz, 2006, p.112) that "performs two acts of erasing: it wipes away all acts of evil that have taken place within Europe, and sets Europe apart from the rest of the world" (Böröcz, 2006, p. 126). European "goodness" is not equally applied to all European locations. The eastern half of the continent has been caught, from the time of the Enlightenment, between discourses of binary contrasts, such as between civilisation and barbarism (Wolff, 1994). Orientalising discourses also come from within, as Eastern Europeans have long held the 'West' as an idea and object to be emulated (Zarycki, 2014) - giving rise to interrelations of "nesting Orientalisms" (Bakić-Hayden, 1995).

In the past five years, moralising hierarchies have been pervasive in Western Europe's responses to southern and eastern states' contestations to EU refugee policy. West European dismay to eastern states' reluctance or outright unwillingness to process asylum claims build on stereotypes of the region as un-cosmopolitan, where its objections to refugee quotas were held as proof of a failure to develop and express inclusive and democratic principles. Dingott Alkopher (2018) highlighted a meaningful divergence between European responses to migration: the Visegrád Four suffer from persistent "feelings of anxiety and ontological security" in relation to themselves and their places and roles in Europe, such that their migration response has been to "securitise" themselves (p. 314; see also Mälksoo, 2019). In contrast, the European Commission sought to externalise these issues to "manage securitisation" in a (supposedly) objective way. In response to the Visegrád Four, the EC "reaffirm[ed] the EU's semi-sovereign identity (collective border control competencies) while preserving a global discourse on human rights and refugee-related inclusive norms" (Dingott Alkopher, 2018, p. 314). Such a response explicitly served to hierarchise and essentialise claims to an appropriate or 'good' morality, giving no space to Eastern European concerns.

Identification of a 'backward' East makes it easier to dismiss regional failures to support migration policy (and conveniently ignores concerns and objections to migration arising from within Western European societies). It also omits any interrogation of how migration politics belie crises of other forms: notably, those arising from protracted imposed austerity measures that have further pauperised and "peripheralized" the already struggling middle classes (Guilluy, 2014), or from undermined EU decision-making pathways as a result of the post-Euro crisis redistributive turn (Börzel, 2016). Quoting Balibar (2004), Smith (2017) comments that, "it is difficult to conceive of supranational institutions being recognized as legitimate if they do not procure for the individuals they bring together an at least equal (and in fact greater) level of security…" (in McConnell et al., 2017, p. 269). On both these fronts, the EU is increasingly failing to convince its 'citizens' that it is fit for purpose.

After the Global Financial Crisis and the collapses of Syria and Libya, the EU initiated "crisis management" through a centralised transfer of

decision-making powers to a range of supra-national institutions. These changes were part of a wider shift of the EU from a project of market integration to one that increasingly subsumes core state powers (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018). This move has since been criticised as deeply undemocratic as "supranational centralisation and intergovernmental coordination … hardly provide for democratic control and participation" (Börzel, 2016, p. 14). Further, they contribute to perceptions around the evolving powers and 'creep' of the EU on issues guarded by several members as inherent to national sovereignty.

Tanja Börzel (2016) reviewed the inefficacy of the new EU "default crisis management" governance modes to respond to the migration crisis. She highlights that transferral of decisions to non-EC or governmental institutions as an attempt to depoliticise and apply technical 'solutions' have been viewed as efforts by right- and populist politicians to silence public controversy and dissent. In a recent series of review essays, Perry Anderson (2020) similarly argues that the "current formula of the EU" is one of "dilute sovereignty without meaningful democracy, compulsory unanimity without participant equality, cult of free markets without care of free trade," where the economic prospects and promises of the Union are "ever weaker", meaning that rises in Euroscepticism hark back to the same conflicts that countries aired when they debated joining the Union.

Below, we bring together grounded perceptions of being "Other" in Europe with articulations of populism, to explore how such intersections culminate in the 'perfect storm' that undermines and questions the EU project. We focus on the ways in which (advocated and introduced) EU governance and financing processes for migration have far-reaching societal consequences that political leaders increasingly protest. Crucially, we argue that a more historically nuanced and reflexive accounting of frontline, eastern members' contexts and contemporary positionalities highlight the differential registers at stake when the EU's future and processes are considered. Boatca suggests "replacing the notion of a single Europe producing multiple modernities by the one of multiple Europes with different and unequal roles in shaping the hegemonic definition of modernity and in ensuring its propagation" (Boatcă, 2010, p. 52). With this in mind, we introduce processes of European asylum claims and the increasingly devolved nature of European funding for refugee reception management.

2.2. EU bordering regimes

The expansion of borders and securitisation of European territory brings us to the analytic of power, specifically the ways in which the EU naturalises its own through borders (Yanagisako & Delaney, 1994). Borrowing from Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) work on "borders as method", we conceive of border spaces as geo-economic and political manifestations of opening, crossing and closing, always underpinned by a politics of "border struggles," that inform a "differential integration into the heartlands of Europe" (Smith in McConnell et al., 2017, p. 268).

The Common European Asylum System is made up of various legislative instruments that govern reception conditions, the legal procedure and considerations in deciding asylum claims, and the determination of member states' responsible for processing these claims. The latter instrument is termed the Dublin Regulation: requiring asylum claims to be submitted and processed in claimant's country of entry on EU territory. Claimants who have travelled beyond this country for any reason are often sent back to the first state of entry – with member states making exceptions for migrants who have travelled from Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria or Italy "due to systemic flaws in asylum procedures or reception conditions" (DG Migration and Home Affairs). Since the high numbers of refugee and migrant arrivals in 2015, the European Commission has tried multiple times to reform its instruments to better reflect a "principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility" (EP, 2020; see also McConnell et al., 2017). Beyond the abandoned 'quota system' for refugee intake, current versions consist of "relocation of asylum seekers from the country of first entry to taking over

responsibility for returning individuals with no right to stay, or various forms of operational support," (DG Migration and Home Affairs, 2021). This spectrum has had to be developed to reflect some member states' opposition to refugee claims' processing and acceptance, or outright refusals to introduce EU policies and legal mechanisms (Börzel & Risse, 2018).

The EU has been accused of wishing to transform – through legal and financial incentives and/or sanctions as necessary, particularly through the domain of migration policy – the domestic societal make-up of EU countries without regard for sovereign states' positions around whether they "want" cultural change (Murray, 2017). As explored in the previous section, the European Commission has focused on technical details and seemingly 'apolitical' solutions in order to realise continued legal, political and economic cooperation. Regarding migration, when several East European states refused to institutionalise a norm of refugee "responsibility sharing" (Betts, 2019), the EC employed emotive appeals to 'solidarity' without debate or engagement for the concerns of its member states. Subsequently, the representativeness of EU institutions has been called into question.

In addition to a complex legal adjudication system, the EU has myriad financing streams for management of refugees, variably available to government agencies and civil society organisations. Finances add enormous complexity to the border regime: Bermant (2017) writes how Mellila, Spain's local economy is dependent on EU funds for border control through a "complex relationship of dependency between centers and peripheries" (p. 124). As the financial crisis made apparent, communities in south-eastern Europe are tasked as guardians of the 'idea' of Europe but are not so clearly envisioned as belonging to this entity (Bermant, 2017). While EU migration policies and their financing claim they aim for a "humane and just" approach to refugees, these are realised and contested within often fraught domestic financial and societal realities. EU financing of civil society actors have challenged some state's interpretations of sovereignty, and have implied a deference to EU bureaucrats and transferral of third-sector "ways of doing things". In our empirical discussion below, we examine these dynamics with particular attention to the ways in which EU financing has impacted local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and their broader political contexts.

3. Understanding 'frontline' politicisation of refugees

In this section we draw on ethnographic material collected between mid-2015 to early-2019 at food distribution points and refugee hubs and NGO offices, to discuss the uncertain and multi-scalar realities of refugee arrival and reception, and how societal concerns were voiced and enacted. We focus on activities within Budapest and Hungarian government communications domestically and internationally to explore the evolutions in expressed populism, CSO responses to arriving refugees in contrast to multi-tiered state responses. First, we focus on what we call 'unwelcome arrival' to explore how received and lived hierarchies and differential experiences of development and 'Europe' manifested on-the-ground. Second, we explore how the realisation of some populist fears led to novel EU-municipal-CSO governance alliances - a development that became used by the 'populist' Hungarian government to re-politicise and contest technically-intentioned EU aid.

3.1. Act 1— arrival: an unwelcoming in Budapest

During September 2015, the Hungarian-Serbian border underwent a transformation from rural outpost, visible and identifiable often only by a break in cornfields and a traffic bar next to a passport hut – this was the southern Schengen border of the European Union after all – to full barbed and electric fencing, patrolled by police in Kevlar often accompanied by police dogs. Refugees crossing these borders and the altercations with border guards and the police became key images of the 'refugee crisis' a vast majority of European publics were seeing, as

images of families camped out alongside barbed wire, or trudging in large groups through agricultural land, were beamed through TVs and newspapers. During this period, the Orbán government insisted that building a fence was merely adhering to the Schengen rules, in a context where refugee behaviour, it was argued, prevented these laws from being applied. Dramatised accounts of refugees' deliberate breaking of fences and forcing entry, or of migrants' refusal to submit fingerprints and thus be registered, underpinned Orbán's reasoning that these were criminal acts. The Hungarian PM subsequently brought in heavy criminal penalties to punish and deter 'irregular' border crossing (HRW, 2015).

The Hungarian government emphasised that refugee qualification and rights were "temporally and spatially contingent" (Shakhsari, 2014, p. 998) as it depicted people crossing borders without papers, with discourses of invasion, criminality and contestation around claims to refugee status. The national government's position was that no one who had reached Hungary – let alone Budapest – was a legitimate refugee seeking political asylum, as significant periods of time had passed since individuals had left their war-torn countries of origin, to when they arrived in Europe. This argument was furthered by suggesting that refugees had passed through several 'safe' countries (including Serbia and Turkey) on their way into the Schengen zone (Apostolova, 2015; Mendelski, 2019; Orbán, 2015). "Why had they not stopped there?", Hungarian politicians asked.

Such views found support and alignment amongst conservative voters who were interviewed during Budapest over that summer. These often-older interlocuters expressed expectations that refugees of today ought to be treated in a similar way to those of earlier times, with examples (often from their own family histories) drawn from the end of WWII and the 1956 Hungarian revolution against the Russian occupation. For example, comparisons were made with how Hungarian refugees behaved in the camps that were set up outside Vienna after the failed 1956 revolution. One schoolteacher exclaimed, "these people don't really know what suffering is. My mother spent three months living in a tent, in the winter. Do you think she was picky? No! She was grateful for everything the Austrians gave her!" (interview PL, Budapest, Sept. 2015).

While older Hungarians interviewed judged today's refugees for being "picky" and for lacking in gratitude, this sentiment also seemed to permeate the narratives of younger volunteer groups. One volunteer noted the selectivity with which migrants accepted food, calling into question "how desperate refugees *really* were". Statements such as these belied implicit expectations that refugees should be desperate and passive, grateful for what they received, and that their claims to refugeehood had a geographical delineation that came without rights to choose where they wanted to live and settle. Other interlocutors affirmed this stance by speaking about refugees not "behaving", or expressing surprise that they seemed to be "wealthy with smartphones", and frustrations that they were not being sufficiently cooperative (or even submissive). Images on Facebook of discarded sandwiches and bottles strewn across public spaces were also rapidly picked up by the media. The most extreme source of blame laid at migrants' door – as well as promulgating a view of refugees as unhygienic and disease-ridden – was voiced by the acting Agricultural Minister at the time, who advanced the outrageous claim that migrants' discarded ham sandwiches introduced pig swine flu to the country (Dénes, 2018).

This societal evaluation of valid 'refugeehood' is a manifestation of what Ticktin (2011) terms the "deserving subject" - one who conforms to humanitarian relief ideals that undergird how vulnerable victims should act. During the 2015 'crisis,' refugees in Hungary were not viewed as conforming to these ideals, and so were deemed difficult to "subordinate as an object of compassion" (Dzenovska, 2016). Historically-informed reminiscences and tropes infused a number of Hungarians' expectations of refugee 'behaviour' and contributed to articulations around expected continuities in the experience of 'refugeehood', as one by definition of marginalisation and waiting; a life "without guarantees".

Consequently, re-aired historical experiences or tropes of refugeehood amongst locals viewing arrived refugees at train stations lent support both to minimising forms of tolerance and solidarity, and to slowing down attempts to accelerate asylum pathways.

These reactions were also highly racialised, based on an existential insecurity in relation to both the presumed Islamic culture of arriving refugees, and the fragile geopolitical and economic place of Hungarians within Europe and the wider world. The preponderance of these insecurities can be traced, in part, to the unfinished process of interpreting a common history. Eastern European societies have not developed an "agreed history" over the happenings, roles and responsibilities of the many traumatic events of the long twentieth century (perhaps in contrast to the history that came before that, in relation to the Ottomans), where grievances from forced post-war resettlement and changed land borders are still (made) politically relevant today (Khanenko-Friesen & Grinchenko, 2017). For this reason, many Eastern European countries undertake what Tony Judt (2011a) called a "competitive victimisation", where, for example, political allegiances are demarcated over questions of whether the suffering under fascism or socialist-communism were "greater" (see also Nadkarni, 2020).

The treatment and position of Hungarians and the Hungarian state over the past century strongly infused domestic reactions to the heightened numbers of refugees during 2015. Discourses and themes of geopolitical disenfranchisement within Europe, loss of status and economic development potential, and victimisation permeated many of our interviews. Such themes have been the basis of Orbán's populism: the languages of dispossession and victimisation have permeated post-socialist Hungarian culture, such that Orbán did not merely create these pressure points around anxieties in relation to refugees, but simply harnessed recognisable tropes that have been preponderant for decades.

Understanding the ways in which grounded discourses circulate and mirror formalised populist articulations highlights the politics of affect and expectations to which they give rise. For example, from August 2015 the German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for widespread European "solidarity" both towards refugees and member states that were geographically on the 'frontline'. These solidarity claims of 'welcome culture' were treated as performative and superficial by Hungarian domestic political culture: some older interlocutors tied in these cries for aid to 1956, a time when appeals for help from the Hungarian state towards the West were unmet. In response to an interview question about calls for solidarity across Europe, two unrelated interlocutors exclaimed, "Of course, *now* they need us!" This direct evocation of victimisation, of "forgotten" times when Eastern European countries "saved" the West from Ottoman invasions, or of injury suffered in times past, demonstrates a different boxing of issues to EU institutions and Western governments. Re-tellings and interpretations of history continue to undergird present claims and aspirations. The belief that historically, solidarity was never demonstrated or shared towards Eastern Europe compounds and justifies the contemporary national, regional prerogative of needing to "help ourselves first". Indeed this mantra arguably finds echoes in other Quixotic nationalistic movements emphasising anti-immigration as an imperative to self-preservation, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK and the Trump elections in the U.S.

Thus, EU and particularly German calls to "solidarity" and "welcome" were deemed hypocritical, where there was a resistance to treating questions of migration and refugees as if they were discrete, technical issues that could be divorced from questions of culture, history, economy, and thus differential responsibility. This focus on history countered the expectations of (Western) European politics where to become European, the East was expected "to leave the past behind [...] in the sense of ceasing to make political claims on the basis of historical injury. At the same time [so the expectation went], one must learn from the historical experience of victimhood and/or complicity with crimes against humanity that Europe embraces as its painful heritage" (Dzenovska, 2016). Dzenovska also makes the case that Eastern European

subjects are also "caught up in this dilemma": their ongoing domestic debates around reparations for post-war and Soviet occupations mean that these states are still "not-yet European" (enough) in the eyes of Western Europe.

Domestically, the political representation of refugee arrivals during August 2015 was spectacular, a part of "shock politics" (Klein, 2017) that have left their mark through all the years since. Events that were bundled together in Hungarian media and political accounts included decontextualised and fragmented scenes of aggressiveness at the border, refugee 'disobedience', and the chaos and disruption tens of thousands of asylum seekers brought to the city and the country's rail network. These events were framed to emphasise the plight not of refugees themselves but rather of border states at risk, subject to a breakdown in rule-of-law processes *and* threats to norms around refugee behaviour. Arising discourses and rhetoric translated fear into both physical and existential forms. Government leaders characterised refugees as "laying siege" to the country and capital and Hungary's and thus Europe's borders (Orbán, 2017).

These depictions manufactured fear amongst those who never even encountered refugees, who were not present in Budapest or at the border: the vast majority of Hungary's electorate. The success of government messaging during this time has set the political stage in the years since, with only the pandemic knocking refugees off from being the top news story on the main television broadcaster, M1. The widespread uptake of populist tropes based in fear of the migrant 'Other' and of mass societal change also significantly influenced national elections that took place three years later: in 2018, rural areas overwhelmingly voted for *Fidesz* after it ran a hate-filled election campaign against refugees; to the extent that retirees living in the countryside often told news media that fear of migration influenced them most as they cast their vote (Földes, 2018). This anxiety in relation to migration were seeded during the summer of 2015, when everyday life in Hungary became replete with rumours and gossip around suspicious people loitering and being spotted in the countryside, or in the outskirts of towns – it didn't matter where you were. One interviewee, who was a high school teacher, recounted that half his class did not participate in a school excursion to the local lake at the start of term because parents believed that the politically-suggested modern 'invasion' by refugees had come to pass, and that 'refugees had been spotted at its shores'. This school was 200 km from Budapest, along the Slovakian border.[1] Events transformed not only political discourse but everyday speech through the introduction of new vernaculars: deliberate mispronunciation of 'migrants' (*migráns*) as "*migrancs*" mocked the issue; George Soros, as a prime alleged supporter of refugee settlement in Europe, came to be popularly ridiculed as "*Gyuri bácsi*" ("Uncle George").

The vehemence of populist rhetoric was undergirded by deliberate negligence on behalf of state actors to provide for arriving refugees. Budapest City Council, for example, ran a 'Refugee Point' that it did not advertise. At Keleti train station, thousands of migrants were essentially stuck, sleeping bags laying across station corridors *en masse*, kids running about and playing beneath fountainheads in the heat, everyone spending days stuck *in situ*, waiting to be permitted further west and north into Europe. The national-level political decisions that led to this impasse were, first, a result of the Hungarian government declaration that asylum seekers would not be permitted to travel further into the EU. As a result, asylum seekers were prevented from boarding transport out of the country. This resulted in an inevitable growing (media-worthy) crowd of people at train stations. Second, the government refused to provide essential services at these stations: no water, no temporary

latrines, and in the first days, no formally arranged food distribution. This was a deliberate expression of *un*welcome in response to refugees, leaving people's most basic needs unmet, with little concern for modes of survival let alone a measure of dignity. These actions were widely viewed as deliberate by interviewed volunteers from organised and spontaneous neighbourhood groups that sprung into action to assist arrivals. These volunteers saw the ensuing chaos, the smells in the summer heat, and simmering anger (from both frustrated refugees and disturbed locals) as working into the national government's plan to demonise migrants and point to their civil disobedience, as the state-aligned media controlled the narrative around these 'dramatic' scenes which epitomised chaos and lack of all propriety.

At the same time, one oppositional effect of government messaging was indeed the flourishing of local groups that took action in response to this state-led *unwelcome*, in an essential effort to bring some form of humane response and solidarity with refugees as well as other European civil society groups doing the same in their own cities (Thieme et al., 2020). Our interview material[2] contains a stark dividing line, between those who had some exposure or experience with refugees at some point during that turbulent year, and those who had viewed events only through the prism of media reports. This is not to suggest that all volunteers and observers from Budapest train stations were unreservedly open to immigration (though the view that "refugees are human beings" was recurrent in interviews); nor do we seek to reinforce "naïve" conceptions of "cosmopolitan and open-minded cities" (Pasieka, 2019, p. 4) in contrast to backward, intolerant rural areas. Rather, volunteers were amenable to basing political decisions around the concept of "compassion" (Dzenovska, 2016; Ticktin, 2011), a stance missing from more reactionary, and distanced, viewpoints. Most volunteers interviewed were cosmopolitan and relatively young; many were students, university teachers or university-affiliated, or worked in the civil society sector. However, civilizational anxieties were also articulated amongst these seemingly 'progressive' volunteers, often expressed as surprise at refugee numbers: for example, "the sheer numbers of people demanding help mean that we probably shouldn't approach this problem from a moral, or individualistic point of view, but as a civilizational one, about our survival in Europe" (student volunteer, November 2017). The volunteer wider point spoke to the difference between providing for the immediate humanitarian needs of arriving refugees, and acknowledging longer-term societal, economic consequences of granting asylum to large numbers of people.

These anxieties were gradually translated into societal make-up and sovereignty concerns. While many lauded the efforts of CSOs to provide help to refugees, European Commission grants to help and encourage these activities came to be presented as a threat to the 'internal' workings and development of domestic polities. We highlight these dynamics in the following section, pointing to the shifting modalities of tolerance and CSO development in Hungary, and the state-led clampdown and response to European financing and CSO activities.

3.2. Act 2 – processes of tightening

Since the infamous summer of 2015 across all four cities in which we conducted fieldwork, there were reverberations and patterns of growing civil society organisation numbers, heightened informal provisioning activities, and widespread actions by individuals to house, finance and help refugees. CSOs had a central role during this time, especially in government contexts without the infrastructure or political will to address the immediate relief needs of arriving refugees. The European Commission was quick to realise this. Direct EU financing of civil groups

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[1] Two years later, a guesthouse owner was physically threatened and his property vandalised after he rented out his premises to vacationing refugees. Locals feared that the refugees would "kidnap their children": https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170927_Ocsenyen_attol_felnek_a_nyaralo_migransok_elrabolnak_a_magyar_gyerekeke.

[2] As the researcher who undertook interviews and fieldwork in Hungary also lives in Hungary, the data that informs the discussion here is supplemented by interviews with retirees and 'ordinary' citizens to contribute a more nuanced understanding of migrant reception and views.

both recognized their capacity for rapid response and ability to 'fill the gaps' (EESC, 2020), and their capacity to sidestep problematic national governments who denied or opposed local provisioning and response. This brought to bear a goal of the European project in the form of 'direct democracy' by 'scale-jumping' between grounded and international governance scales, as the EU financed and incentivised local initiatives. However, the new opportunities granted to CSOs and the often chaotic, busy and fuzzy application and aspirational space that they created was re-interpreted by some states as sovereignty and security threats. High levels of aid were branded as a sovereignty issue that represented the 'creep' of the European project into areas other than the economic, as the EU was claimed to try to shore up a civil sphere that was branded as not genuinely domestic nor democratically accountable.

Thus a process we conceptualise as 'tightening' followed from 2016 onwards especially, in opposition to the continued arrival of refugees and migrants into Europe, and this oppositional stance was also articulated against formal Europe. Forms of clampdown manifested in different ways - from newly imposed administrative and bureaucratic requirements for the processing of refugees and their claims, to criminal penalties for CSOs and individuals aiding in the housing or border-crossing of refugees. These penalties have been perhaps harshest in Hungary, for the government's response combines the criminalisation of agents "working for" refugees and migrants with rhetoric against a "changed" society funded from the "outside". The western-sourced financing of NGOs in Hungary laid them open to domestic political attack: their activities were branded by the Orbán government as "imported" and part of "western liberal agendas" tied in to the financier activity of George Soros and his Open Society Foundation (OSF). Soros and the OSF have become highly politicised and demonised representations by the Orbán regime used to caricature westernised liberal optimism (and thus elitism, especially of Hungarians who, like Soros, had emigrated). NGO leaders working in Hungary recognized the salience of arguments that questioned the "democratic development" of the domestic civil society sector. As one such leader explained:

> "We don't receive significant domestic support from citizens for our activities. Our funding is entirely from UNICEF, the OSF and the EU. There isn't a 'bourgeois middle class' in this country who act as philanthropists, or support NGOs with time and money. This layer of society has not had time to develop yet. We are not a real democracy. People do not stand up for their rights, as they don't know what they are. So the government attacks us, attacks our work, and we have no support at home. They're right, essentially: we do not have a democratic mandate" (interview, Budapest, February 2018).

The Hungarian crackdown culminated in the passage of *Lex NGO* in 2017 that required the registration with the government of NGOs receiving funding from abroad over the value of HUF7.2 million/year. This law led to extraordinary scenes in 2018, where *Fidesz* Party supporters placed identifier red dots above the doors of NGOs that read "organisation supporting immigration". From July 1, 2018, vaguely defined activities "enabling illegal migration" carried penalties of up to a year in prison. Gradually from this time, with a single exception, all official civil actions and programmes were shut down.

Beyond delimiting and, in Hungary's case, criminalising CSO activities, comprehensive legislative oversight brings into conflict the EU's commitment and application of 'direct democracy' principles within member states. While EU institutional communications focus on calls for "solidarity" in ways that plays out its "goodness", such promotions ignore and fail to engage with meaningful questions around decision-making within the EU. For example, a key point of Orbán's political statements during 2015 concerned the proxy role of Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor at the time, for deciding EU-level policy on open borders, without consultation with or consideration to other member states. Merkel's position directly counteracted 'frontline' country efforts to follow Schengen rules. This led to a stark contradiction between an EU "tough on border security" evident through its own Council Directives

(for e.g., 2002/946/JHA, 2002; Europa, 2002), and the new reality borne of some leaders' political rhetoric and media communications.

These contrasts also appeared as contested populist narratives from Hungarian political leaders, who deliberately highlighted the inherently political stances of formal EU institutions during the 2015 refugee crisis as against "Hungarian interests". This framing gets at the under-explored heart of contrasting visions for the EU: conservative politicians resist an umbrella government of nations and reject calls for the importance of "common values" as facets or even prerequisites of any EU. A key interlocutor from Budapest claimed that, "Hungarian voices are missing in Brussels", where anyone working for an EU institution needs to "keep working for Hungary" (Budapest council interview, February 2018). Implicit here is the popular idea that nation-state interests always trump any collective European interest. The preponderance of this view in Hungary is rampant amongst the unfortunate widespread labelling of Hungarians who "help" the West "criticise" Hungary as "traitors", including by Orbán (see Böröcz, 2006 for an in-depth exploration of such a case); examples include journalists, scholars, opposition-party EPPs, and so on. The suggestion that the EU is a "higher calling" than the interests of an individual state is viewed as liberal elitism, and a view divorced from any *realpolitik*. Grounded discourses attested to the popularity of these views: in response to questions around the contrast between German or EU positions on refugees' entry into Europe contra the Hungarian government, multiple Budapest-based interviewees stated that "Europe doesn't represent the little people", and "the West wants to push us down" (*"a nyugat el akar minket nyomni"*).

In this context, novel EU funding mechanisms to NGOs and other urban-based actors were viewed as problematic by state politicians and often citizens alike, as such funding streams and connected activities contrasted to wider societal views and brought into relief the hierarchies between Eastern and Western Europe.

4. Conclusion

Current EU geopolitical fragmentations have emerged from historical, aspirational and economic fissures across the continent, that have exacerbated issues raised by migration and made visible uneven geographies of refugee management amidst rising populist sentiments. In this article, we have introduced a place-based politics of *un*humanitarian response, to 'provincialise' western-dominated accounts of the post-2015 refugee 'crisis' in Europe, and to historicise the seeming epitomisation of *un*welcome in an Eastern European context. Such an approach complicates the implicit hierarchies and binaries imbued in the rhetoric and claims of 'goodness' and 'solidarity' from largely non-border Western European states and the European Commission, contra the lack of humanity perceived to be shown by Eastern European governments.

Autonomous grassroots and recognized civil society efforts burgeoned from 2015, as a result of initial state absence, which have been subsequently curtailed in often punitive ways as states seek to regain authority. Disjunctures appear in expectations of 'welcome' or 'solidarity' and their wholesale application across EU member-states, laying bare variegated experiences of already-existing economic marginalisation that draws heavily on (often problematic) moral/nostalgic claims, overtaxed welfare systems, and the complicated matrix of asylum-seeking laws and regulations that have created uneven pressures on southern-eastern states. Returning to Pasieka (2019), a "sincere engagement" with racist-xenophobic views, particularly in Budapest, reveals nuance and ambivalence *alongside* deep resentment that at times coincides with, exceeds and/or wanes in relation to what is promulgated from above. Again, we do not excuse or minimise these views, but rather similar to Gokariksel and Secor, we argue that "the real impasses that the arrival of refugees […] can generate are not easily patched up with rhetoric or geopolitical strategy" (2020, p. 1250). And what we have also observed in other EU cities of the 'West' are continued expressions

of intolerance and unwelcome that echo what is more pronounced in the Hungarian context, which troubles the supposed binary of west as tolerant/welcoming, and east as intolerant/unwelcoming. Indeed, alarming forms of "tightening" have appeared in different gradations all over Europe.

It remains unclear how either the domestic political stories of hard-line Eastern European state leaders, nor how the stories of "left behind" Europe will unfold, given that Europe has largely failed to develop adequate decision-making or situational compromises to its economic and political woes. In many ways, Europe's handling of refugees comes at the same time as economic marginality in Western Europe has become more marked, while in the East, a more overt articulated state-led moralising and economic policy marginalises vulnerable groups (such as refugees, Roma communities, and the homeless) and reproduces and maintains social outcasting and stigma under the guise of societal 'values'. Into this debate we introduce a call for the recognition of this differential production of marginality within the EU, which also serves as a stick to discipline and portray the East in a particular way. The EU actively re-peripheralises and solidifies hierarchies: plans for EU decision-making and consultation are to be formalised into a multi-tiered, 'in/out' institution, wherein the EU project will always be one of "bordering, ordering, othering" (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Recent articulations of plans include those from French President Macron who in 2019 proposed a return to a three-tiered Europe, in recognition that the post-1990s expansion of the EU has "failed" (The Economist, 2019).

The challenge of populist leaders to the EU is fundamental, as their demands ask to what extent the EU is capable of reflecting differential public policy aspirations by its member states, where these states have joined the EU with highly variable historical, economic and social terrain for realising (Western) European "visions" for Europe. The EU has been unable to answer this challenge in any coherent way. In talking of 'democracy' and 'equal partners', the realities of the EU's relations between its members and its own institutions are lost, in particular the hugely varying degrees of (financial, political, security) dependency and the effects these have on meaningful power and abilities to engage and negotiate.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further put into sharp relief the contested debates about the role of state provision and care, the existing inequalities within cities and states, the closure of borders, and the "endless emergency" powers enacted by Parliaments through Eastern *and* Western Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 highlights not only the differentiated treatment by European states of refugees based on where they come from, but has renewed tensions between states around the impacts of economic sanctions against Russia, and new formations of economic, energy and political uncertainties that the conflict continues to portend. The pandemic and the Ukrainian war both reflect the contradictions at play during *époques* of crises: at local city scales they have generated or even revitalised localised forms of mutual aid and solidarity, akin to the neighbourhood-based humanitarianism seen in European cities since 2015 towards refugees, while at national scales, the pandemic legitimised further revanchist policies towards migrants and border crossers. European-level responses around coordinated action regarding vaccine roll-outs, economic solidarity to cope with financial and job losses, and ongoing aid to Ukrainian refugees have again been uncertain, tepid and slow, further hollowing out the basis of European 'values' and its links to its actions.

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