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INTRODUCTION

On the (geo)political salience of geographical imaginations: a central European perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a Research Colloquium that investigates relationships between the production of Central European geopolitical imaginaries and processes of European integration. Specifically, we interrogate the ways in which Central European geopolitical imaginaries have involved the recasting of old and the emergence of new framings of regional identities, regional cooperation and geopolitical orientations. Our specific focus on Hungary is not coincidental; since 2010 the Hungarian government has pursued a strident and rather noisy "geopoliticization" of its relations with the EU, its Central European neighbors and beyond. Together with Poland, Hungary has been an active producer of scenarios of national and European destiny according to conservative and often reactionary notions of identity and illiberal values. Contextual background explaining the rise of EU-skeptic imaginations of national purpose is provided and suggests that economic disparities as well as unresolved national tensions between liberalism and conservatism have been major drivers. As we will argue, stubborn reliance on fixed geopolitical ideas as a source of influence and power can lead to rigid commitments to identity politics that can both thwart more effective regional cooperation and harm national economic and political interests.

Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical scene is one of considerable upheaval and Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine signals a number of things. Firstly, with the war against Ukraine, Russia's flaunting of international law and national borders has reached new extremes; exacerbating the unpredictability of world affairs. Both mainstream realist scenarios according to which geopolitical actors behave rationally according to "inherent" national interests as well as more idealist geopolitics of cooperation provide little guidance for interpreting

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the present state of affairs. At the same time, the Ukraine crisis clearly reflects the power of geopolitical thinking and geographical imaginaries based on misrepresentations of history and national identity. Russia's present aggression against Ukraine confirms that the boundaries between realist politics of national interest and geopolitical framings of supposed and/or contrived cultural struggle are anything but clear-cut.

Beyond the narrative of a civilizational contest between the Liberal West and the Russian World, the European Union (EU) itself has become a backdrop for regional ideas and geopolitical imaginaries that reflect affirmations as well as contestations of mainstream notions of the EU as a political community. Nowhere is this perhaps more evident as in the case of Central Europe, more specifically the EU-member states of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In the guise of the Visegrád Four (V4) Group, they have conjured up both a vital contribution to integration through a demonstrative "return to Europe" as well as an "East-West divide" in terms of challenges to basic community values. Central European member states, Hungary and Poland in particular, have also sought to re-imagine Europe as a (geo)political space along neo-nationalist and illiberal lines. While none of these interpretations of Central Europe's positionality within the EU offer more than partial insights into complex socio-political situations, they do reveal many of the tensions inherent in the process of European integration.

Gerard Toal (2017, 39) argues that "every state or aspiring state has a geopolitical culture. This can be defined as its prevailing sense of identity, place and mission in the world." The histories of Central European geopolitical thinking are rich and exhibit a conceptual continuity that has withstood turbulent times. Nevertheless, these geopolitical ideas are neither hegemonic nor immutable. Paul Richardson (2018) suggests that ideological positions as well as pragmatic and dynamic elements of geographical thinking need consideration in order to reflect shifting geo-economic realities and domestic concerns. According to this view, a nuanced perspective would also consider the inherently fluid nature of geopolitical imaginaries which, despite their historical anchorings, represent national attempts at achieving "strategic positionality" in uncertain times. Following Richardson's suggestion, this Research Colloquium contributes to academic debate regarding the enduring salience of geographical and geopolitical imaginations in shaping practices of statecraft. There exists a rich literature on the histories of Central European geopolitical thinking, such as Hungarian Turanism (Akcalı and Umut 2012), Polish Jagellonianism (Ištok, Kozárová, and Polačková 2018), or Czech anti-geopolitical traditions (Drulák 2006; Kazharski 2018) which continue to be mobilized in contemporary contexts. However, these framings need to be understood in the light of broader shifts in geopolitical thinking and competing conceptualizations of EU-Europe as a political space.

As Paul Richardson (2022) mentions in his Commentary on the Research Colloquium, one stark example of the geopoliticization of European identities was again provided by Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minster, in a July 2022 speech in Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő in Hungarian) in which he pejoratively characterized the "West" as a society of "mixed races". The narrative of a people losing its cultural roots is part and parcel of the Hungarian leader's opportunistic appropriations of geopolitical imaginaries of East and West. According to this discursive strategy, Hungary is at times the safeguard of western Christian and traditional family values and, at other times, a champion of the cultural authenticity and traditionalism of eastern cultures from which it emerged. The 2022 speech, set in a Hungarian minority town in Romania, was both a calculated and crude provocation targeted at the EU, multiculturalism, and enemies, both real and imagined, of Orbán's illiberal regime. Given Hungary's dependency on EU funding, it is remarkable that Orbán's pathological thirst for recognition appears to preclude a more conciliatory position. On the other hand, this fiery speech was also calculated to divert attention from the parlous state of Hungary's economy and finances, the result of 12 years of mismanagement, crony capitalism, and corruption. Such sobering assessments notwithstanding, Orbán's geopolitics of cultural othering commands, at least for the time being, considerable influence; indeed, the notion of Hungary as a civilizational force in both Europe and Eurasia is impactful because it resonates in popular imaginations.

This Research Colloquium is a product of research carried out by the Borders Research Group of the Hungarian Institute for Economic and Regional Studies. The broadly defined objective of this research has been to relate the production of Central European geopolitical imaginaries to processes of European integration. Specifically, we have investigated the ways in which geopolitical imaginaries of post-Cold War Central Europe have begun to take on greater complexity through the recasting of old and the emergence of new framings of regional identities, regional cooperation, and geopolitical orientations.[1] Our approach takes inspiration from traditions of geographical research that emphasize the subjective and experiential nature of space-society relations and their representation in geographical imaginations (Lowenthal 1961; Gregory 1994; Howie and Lewis 2014; Paül and Trillo-Santamaría 2021; Prince 1962; Said 1979). As part of the Research Colloquium we investigate geopolitical imaginations as a form of meaning-making, often informed by "we/them" stereotypes, that derive sustenance from myths of national origin, features of the natural landscape, historical memories, and events and other factors that are narrated as part of a common national experience. Such imaginations frequently suggest trajectories of national destiny and purpose which can be strategically invoked as part of specific political agendas and interests.

Our specific focus on Hungary is not coincidental; since 2010 the Hungarian government has pursued a strident and rather noisy "geopoliticization" of its relations with the EU, its Central European neighbors, and beyond. Together

with Poland, Hungary has been an active producer of scenarios of national and European destiny according to conservative and often reactionary notions of identity and illiberal values. Additionally, the Hungarian government has pursued neighborhood and foreign policy projects that challenge those of the EU, particularly in regard to its "Eastern Opening" and courting of Russia, China, and other autocratic governments. While these ideological contestations co-exist with much more pragmatic regional ideas of "re-integration" and cooperation it is the former that have received most attention in academic debate. In order to provide a broader perspective, Czech, Polish, and Slovak geopolitical ideas will be also addressed; in part they make for a stark contrast with the Hungarian government's more "revolutionary" framings of Central Europe.

Integration, cooperation and fragmentation: pondering the 'east-west divide'

In our research, we have sought to uncover how national geographical imaginations reflect the uneven process of European integration, both affirming and contesting basic premises of political community. The Central European perspective that we elaborate here requires contextualization, particularly with regard to supposed illiberal turns and notions of East-West division within the EU. Geographical and geopolitical ideas emanating from Central Europe reflect the complexity of a post-2004 enlargement EU which is not only more heterogeneous culturally and politically but also highly diverse in socio-economic terms. One example of this reality is the narration of an "East-West divide" within Europe and the EU. This divide has been conceptualized in rather different ways: as a reflection of structural and socio-economic asymmetries, as historical and cultural difference, and as an expression of core-periphery relations between old and new member states (Ágh 2010; Kuus 2007; Müller 2020; Zarycki 2014). In political terms, it has become fashionable to evoke East-West divides within the EU in terms of political values, cultural attitudes, and commitments to liberal democracy as reflected in the suggestion that Central European member states are questioning their commitments to the EU (Anghel 2020; Zielonka 2019). Here, the media image of "big bad Visegrád" as proclaimed by western media comes to mind. However, simplified narratives of East-West division obfuscate, perhaps intentionally, the fact that negative consequences of economic and political transformation contributed to discontent and the growing support of anti-EU and populist parties in Central Europe (Rodriguez-Pose 2018; Schmidt 2018). The disruptive character of post-socialism has been evidenced by the unfavorable framework conditions that have governed Central European development within the European and global economy (Gál and Schmidt 2017; Bârgăoanu, Buturoiu, and Durach 2019).

As has been well documented (Smith 2002; Appel and Orenstein 2016; Pluciński 2020) the economic transition of post-socialist states, and Central

Europe in particular, was fueled by neoliberal ideologies and political agendas of East-West convergence that involved marketization, privatization, and foreign direct investment. All of these created a moral, legal, and structural environment that conditioned EU integration trajectories into the EU as well as insertion into global economic divisions of labor. As a consequence, the integration of new EU-member states has reflected highly asymmetric power relations and exacerbated historical financial and technological dependencies. This became particularly noticeable with the regionally differentiated impacts of several EU crises after 2008, which also revealed the fragility of the convergence paradigm (Cichocki 2017; Smith and Swain 2010; Gál and Schmidt 2017).

However, (geo)economic asymmetries and neo-liberalism are only part of the story. Populism and right-wing nationalism that feed off a sense of discontent and disempowerment are common features of everyday political struggles within the EU as a whole. In the countries of Central Europe, however, unresolved historical tensions and ideological differences between conservativism and liberalism have deeply influenced understandings of national purpose within the EU (Scott 2020). Moreover, new member states have very different national pasts and, as Mälksoo (2010) states, they have also challenged the imposition of EU-European identities based on western interpretations of post-World War II and post-Cold War experience. The visionaries behind the idea of Central European cooperation were striving to make their own imprint on Europe rather than simply appropriate pre-defined rules, values, and ideas. The notion of Central Europe was recast by intellectuals such as Jenő Szűcs, Czesław Milosz, and Milan Kundera in order to signal a move from imagining Central Europe as a sphere of influence to constructing it as a partner in the broader integration of Europe (Trencsényi 2017).

Disappointment with the results of European integration help explain Central Europe's apparent shift to EU-critical positions (see Krastev and Holmes 2019). More significantly, national-conservative political forces have been able to exploit the EU's perceived lack of direction and consolidate power through an affirmation of national identity and sovereignty as well as "traditional values". Within this context of integration and fragmentation and as a member of a larger political community, Hungary, together with Czechia, Poland and Slovakia, has strived to avoid political marginalization and to achieve greater recognition and influence within the EU. Geographic imaginations both old and new reflect ways in which Hungary and its Central European neighbors have sought to define a sense of national purpose and actorness within the EU. Consequently, different political agendas and strategies have produced a mosaic of geopolitical imaginaries that seek to counteract peripherality that, at the same time, are also multivocal and ambiguous in terms of their European orientations. These issues emerge, for example, in the question of promoting greater regional cooperation within Central Europe. As is well known, the nearly unequivocal opening toward the West, and thus the process of EU integration,

has been accompanied by more modest, but nevertheless regionally significant, processes of cooperation involving initiatives such as the Visegrád Four and the Central European Free Trade Area (Kazharski 2018). Up until the early 2010s, the latter were largely subordinated to "East-West" political orientations and lacked political substance. However, under present conditions, they increasingly reflect tensions between the EU and Central European countries, underscored by recent disagreement regarding refugee and migration policies. It would of course be misleading to suggest that EU-skepticism automatically translates to more Central European unity. Economic interdependencies reveal strong East-West ties but much less interaction between the V4 states themselves. Furthermore, as Scott (2022) suggests in his paper in the Research Colloquium, a redoubled focus on national purpose has been highly divisive and is evidenced by the rifts caused by Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán's ideological affinities with Russia's political regime and lack of support for Ukraine.

The research colloquium articles

The case studies and commentary included in the Research Colloquium shed light on the different socio-political rationales that inform Central European, primarily Hungarian, geopolitical framings of European positionality. The examples that are elaborated involve appropriations of regional ideas, identity constructs, and historical memories and their salience is characterized by a heightened degree of politicization, exemplified by the Hungarian government's confrontational "anti-politics" vis à vis the EU. The sources used are based largely on political discourses and policy documents but also reflect major scholarly and political narratives that emerge from primarily geographic and regional research. The three cases are briefly discussed below.

James Scott (2022) develops a discussion of the Visegrád Four (V4) as a kaleidoscopic regionalist idea which defies unambiguous categorization. In some assessments V4 signifies nothing less than the re-constitution of Central Europe according to an endogenous strategy of cooperation and mutual assistance. In less prosaic terms, V4 has been also studied as an example of pragmatic subregionalism within the EU in order to leverage political influence. As has been mentioned above, more recent framings of V4 as a center of EU-critical "antipolitics" has introduced the narrative of illiberal or radical right regionalism driven, for example, by Hungarian and Polish appropriations of V4 as a platform for neo-nationalist policies in Europe. In terms of a geopolitical imaginary, the V4 is kaleidoscopic, suggesting simultaneous processes of integration and fragmentation as well as affirmation and contestation of the *acquis communautaire*. What is nevertheless evident, is that this regionalist arrangement reflects Central European member states' long-term objective of securing political influence within the EU. It has also served to create a counternarrative to the paradigm of East-West difference, pushing against, among others, a two-speed

Europe. V4 is, in other words, a geopolitical space that provides an overarching narrative of European integration while allowing for the adjustable alignment of domestic agendas and concerns. Nevertheless, the robustness of V4 as a regional bloc is ultimately constrained by different domestic interests as well as differing political commitments regarding various aspects of EU governance and policy. Consequently, the geopolitical idea of a fundamental regional illiberalism belies an unstable, temporally limited and contingent constellation of social and political agendas. Tensions involved in this regionalist arrangement are exemplified by Hungarian and Polish national conservative agendas and their interaction with the more measured pragmatism and more liberal leanings of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Russia's aggression against Ukraine coupled with Orban's lack of sympathy – indeed antagonism – toward Ukraine due to ethnopolitical tensions has further fragmented the cohesion of V4. Presently, the "Hungarization" of the V4 has become a major geopolitical issue that threatens to diminish the group's significance.

In the next paper, Péter Balogh (2022) explores geopolitical framings of Hungarian national identity that have emerged alongside V4 cooperation. As he indicates, political discourse about Hungary's role in Europe has given rise to highly ambiguous geopolitical self-images that emphasize Hungarian exceptionalism. These self-images simultaneously invoke contradictory geopolitical traditions, such as that of mythical Eastern and Eurasian national origins (Turanism) and that of a Christian bulwark against "Eastern" threats. In quoting Stepić and Zarić (2016), Balogh argues that Hungary has for some time exhibited an acute "geopolitical schizophrenia" in its attempts to grapple with and reconcile its Eastern and Western identities. The notion of Hungary as bastion of western Christianity has been applied in different historical contexts, for example against the Mongols, Turks (Islam), eastern Orthodoxy, and Bolshevism. Turanist ideas, in turn, have been applied in situations where Hungarian interests have been seen to be at odds with western influence and attachments. Turanism in its original iterations specifically challenged the regional hegemonies of Austria and Germany by offering an alternative narrative of nation-building. More recently, ideas from both traditions have increasingly been incorporated in the present Hungarian regime's ideological arsenal targeted at Western liberal democracy and cosmopolitanism. The simultaneous referencing of Hungary's Western and Eastern identities has been facilitated by another national self-image, that of a bridge between East and West. While this European-Eurasian crossroads discourse is not unique within the EU context, the extent to which Hungary has attempted to balance between East and West is quite striking. At the same time, Balogh reminds us that the co-existence of these contradictory images clearly has its limits. There is, on the one hand, Hungary's insistence on Europe's Christian traditions as a basis for political community. On the other hand, Hungary's economic dependence on Western investment and EU support is overwhelming and cannot be replaced by a deft

pivot eastward. The so-called Eastern Opening (keleti nyitás) which has involved a foreign policy and geopolitical strategy of engagement with China, Russia, Turkey, and other autocratic contesters of the EU's international authority, is perhaps the most politically significant expression of Hungary's Eurasianism, but has so far provided few tangible benefits.

James Scott and Zoltán Hajdú (2022) provide a third example of geographical imagining and its geopolitical consequences, that of the Carpathian Basin. In its most "neutral" understanding, the Carpathian Basin, perhaps more widely known as the Pannonian Basin, is a geomorphological subsystem with relatively clear boundaries. However, the term Carpathian Basin also has strong political connotations as a regional space of considerable national and historical symbolism. This is essentially due to the close alignment of the Basin with the territoriality of the old Hungarian Crown as well the status of sizable Hungarian ethnic minority communities in the region. As presently used, the idea of the Carpathian Basin reflects different perspectives on Hungary's place in Europe and one common narrative in this regard is that of a fragmented but inherent, geographically given, regional unity. As a result, Hungarian understandings of regional neighborhood have partly mirrored shifts toward a more European perspective in terms of geographically defined (and thus natural) spaces for regional cooperation, "de-bordering", and (re)integration. At the same time, contestations of the Carpathian Basin idea are reflected in the concerns expressed by Hungary's neighbors, Slovakia and Romania in particular. The historical and ethnopolitical context with which the Basin has been frequently referenced challenges in the eyes of Hungary's neighbours an "objective" geographical or even geomorphological definition of the Basin. Slovakia, for example, has resisted official use of the term as a cross-border regional concept because of its Budapest-centric nature. From a Hungarian perspective, moreover, there are tensions between different and partly competing notions of the Carpathian Basin as a cooperation space. Hungarian interpretations reflect both national and European perspectives in terms of "re-integration" in order to (re)-establish urban networks, address core-periphery imbalances, create modern transport corridors, coherent water management structures and other issues. However, such regional cooperation agendas co-exist with ethnopolitical ambitions related to the status of ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring states. National conservative appropriations of the Carpathian Basin have involved interventionist agendas that violate diplomatic protocol and suggest a natural Hungarian hegemony in the region, at least in economic terms. Moreover, right-wing groups in Hungary have appropriated irredentist and revisionist discourses that do little to promote shared notions of region. Ultimately, the self-referential nature of this regional idea has not been conducive to more effective cooperation – Hungary's neighbours feel either excluded or directly challenged by reference to it.

In the final contribution to the Research Colloquium the Commentary by Paul Richardson (2022), a scholar who has traced the genesis of momentous political decisions, such as Brexit, to "hyperreal" fantasies of national sovereignty, provides several prescient observations. As he points out, visions of the world based on reductionist nationalism might effectively serve the interests of illiberal political forces but ultimately work against any sense of national self-interest. Ultimately, the case of Hungary, and that of Poland to an extent, demonstrates that regional imaginaries of national exceptionalism do little to promote meaningful cooperation. Instead of creating a stronger Central European community of interests, for example, the (geo)politicization of national historical memories only serves to fragment the region. Moreover, Richardson suggests that the imaginaries outlined in this Research Colloquium exhibit tenuous historical and geographical anchorings, obfuscating the complexity not only of regional ideas but national identity as well. What these imaginaries do reveal are the insecurities and agendas of political elites who directly benefit from their often brazen exploitation. Indeed, Richardson reminds us that attempts by political and intellectual elites to fix unambiguous notions of national and regional identity can instead result in more fragmentation and greater mistrust within and between societies. Illiberal and ethno-nationalist geographical imaginaries serve particular interests in the short term but in the longer perspective "run counter to the claims of cohesiveness that they espouse".

Consequences

What might be some of the ramifications, in political and academic terms, of the increasing politicization of geographical imaginings? The contributions to the Research Colloquium suggest at least two. The first of these relates to concerns that arise from manipulations of identity politics cum geopolitics. Such manipulations have been evidenced in new member states by populist and neo-nationalist discourses that warn against a supposed liberal Schmittian enemy (see Krasteva 2017). Despite their importance as meaning makers, geopolitical imaginations also give cause for concern if they are not subject to adaptation or negotiation and result in discursive and interpretive deadlocks. Stubborn reliance on fixed geopolitical ideas as a source of influence and power can lead to rigid commitments to identity politics that, as Ejdus (2020) suggests, can be deleterious to national economic and political interests. Ejdus has made this case for Serbia in the 1990s and one need look no further than Putin's "Russian World" ideology for a similar and tragic example. In the case of contemporary Hungarian politics, it is also rather clear that mixing geopolitics with questions of national identity has not served the country's best interests. Orbán's unconciliatory use of this strategy in order to disregard EU values and rules exhibits "narcissistic continuity" (see Chernobrov 2016) but has also contributed to

Hungary's economic vulnerability. Moreover, Orban's continued openness to Putin has served to isolate Hungary within the EU and to damage any sense of illiberal solidarity with Poland.

The second concluding point is one that relates to the identity of the EU and the conundrum of reconciling heterogeneity with cohesion. The narration of significant cultural and historical divides, regardless of their basis in facts, reminds us that the EU has become a very different place since the 1990s. Multiple crises and contestations, a "more" geopolitical world, problems of solidarity within the Union, as well as other challenges give evidence of the need for a more flexible approach to understanding what being EU-European entails. The undeniable impact of illiberal identity politics and geopolitical imaginaries that challenge mainstream understandings of the EU as a political community are a warning sign in this regard (see Kováts and Smejkalova 2019). What nevertheless remains unclear are both the achievements and practical political ramifications of a more heterocentric understanding of the EU (see Mälksoo 2010). Condescending narratives of Eastern Europe have not served the objectives of cohesion and have, as many scholars have pointed out, even fed populist and neo-nationalist contestations of EU values. However, despite distinct differences in terms of values within the EU as a whole, EU-critical (geo)political discourses in the new member states generally contrast with strong popular support for EU member-ship. This contrast is particularly stark in the case of Hungary, where not only membership but adherence to the EU *acquis* remains strongly supported (Göncz and Lengyel 2021; Research Center 2019). This discrepancy should provide food for thought when debating the future course of the EU.

Note

1. Specific reference is made here to the research project "Geopolitical Processes and Imaginaries in Central Europe: States, Borders, Integration and Regional Development".

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