

Introduction: Race in CEE migrations

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The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is going through extraordinary changes in relation to migration. Millions of people are on the move to, from and within CEE and these mobility patterns have never been more pronounced. The full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine mobilised an unprecedented outward migration and since 2022 forced millions of Ukrainians to seek safety in Central and Western Europe (IOM 2024). But even before the invasion, the extent of migration from Ukraine, but also from outside Europe, was growing (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk 2022, Styrnol et al. 2023a, 2023b, Magdziarz et al. 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). This included economic migrants seeking to fill labour shortages in CEE and people claiming refuge either in the region or using it as an entrypoint to reach Western Europe. In the aftermath of the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in the Mediterranean and beyond (2014-2016), and most recently at the European Union’s (EU’s) Eastern borders, violence has become normalised. The Hungarian-Serbian, Lithuanian-Belarusian and Polish-Belarusian borders have become increasingly militarised with daily pushbacks and a growing number of migrants being injured and dying while stuck at or attempting to cross these borders (Judzińska and Sendyka 2022, Narkowicz 2021). Race, racialisation and whiteness are at the centre of these spectacles (Rexhepi 2018, De Genova 2013).

CEE migrations may be associated with westward mobilities - stereotypically embodied by the figure of a Romanian fruit picker in the United Kingdom (UK) or a Polish care worker in Germany - but the region itself and its migrations have changed drastically in volume, destination and purpose. From largely migrant sending geographies in early 2000s, many CEE countries have transitioned to those simultaneously sending and receiving migrants. The direction of CEE migrations has also changed from primarily Europe’s East-to-West to the more diverse *from*, *to*, and *within* the region. Those changes are reflected in who is coming and going whether in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, age or personal dreams and

aspirations. The *who* in this changing landscape - and *how* they are produced as familiar or different - is at the centre of this collection.

The book includes chapters on Bulgarians, Lithuanians, Romanians, Hungarians, Czechs and Poles, including Polish Roma, in Western Europe and in the CEE as well as Ukrainians in Poland and non-CEE migrants at the Polish-Belarus border. Crucially across these chapters, there is tension between who is let in and who is kept away; whether at the borders or via other policy measures. This selection frequently runs across racial lines with invocations about the importance of ‘cultural proximity’ of migrants arriving to the region and assumptions that those from neighbouring countries would ‘integrate’ faster than those from more distant places. Despite frequent public and academic discourses about the irrelevance of race in the region, due to its racial homogeneity and a lack of history of colonialism, CEE has been entangled with global colonial regimes (Drnovšek Zorko 2019) both benefiting from colonialism and being subjected to colonial exploitation (Balogun 2022, Boatcă 2019, Jaworska 2011). Important, but only recently more acknowledged, are the histories that point to ambitions of colonial expansions in the region that fed into long held dreams of joining the global capitalist economy (Grzechnik 2019, Snochowska-Gonzales 2020, Baker et al 2024).

Although these colonial histories reverberate in current day migration regimes, migration studies have paid relatively little attention to colonialism, postcolonialism and decolonisation (Mayblin and Turner 2021). This is even more notable in the CEE context where understanding migration through the lens of race, racism, racialisation and whiteness is lacking. In this book, we show the relevance of these theories through empirical examples and lived experiences of migration to, from and within the region. It is our aim to think of the diversity of CEE migrations with attention to how racial and colonial legacies are made visible, reproduced but also obscured in current-day mobilities.

Writing from the margins?

This book builds upon a series of events and meetings organised as part of the international network *PostCEE: Postdependence Geographies in Central and Eastern Europe* established in

2020 by the editors and funded by the Regional Studies Association¹. It is the result of collective thinking and writing from across geographical locations with the common aim to shed critical perspectives on the issues of migration to, from and within the CEE region.

This Introduction, although authored by the books' editors, have taken shape in constant dialogue with its contributors who have been pushing back, suggesting nuances and questioning our take on certain things, especially our reflections on our own marginality, the decolonial underpinnings of this project and the choice of referring to the geographies of inquiry in this book as Central and Eastern Europe rather than for example Eastern Europe. For many of us, especially those thinking with ideas of nesting orientalisms (Bakić-Hayden 1995) the latter is a more inclusive term. We debated the importance of getting the terminology right and also reflected on the constant need to explain and justify ourselves as (semi)peripheral scholars. We unpack some of these tensions below.

We are writing this Introduction from three different places; London in England, Glasgow in Scotland and Kraków in Poland. Our contributors are based across Europe and beyond; in Lithuania, Finland, Poland, Germany, Ireland, Japan and Canada. Despite being regionally scattered, we all share in common that in our diverse identities we trace a connection to what we refer to here as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Some of us were born and raised in CEE and have not migrated and others are diasporic scholars; perhaps most of us writing in this collection migrated from the East to the West during our early and adult life and have since reflected on that experience in our own scholarship. This is why, in multiple discussions that were taking place among us in the past few years, we referred to this book as being about 'our' region, embracing critically all the tensions and contradictions this brings up. Although we might never agree on the boundaries of 'our region' and feel differently comfortable with our own belonging to it, there is a significance in the fact that all of us locate not only our research, but also parts of ourselves within the CEE. As other scholars have discussed earlier, and we will elaborate further down, Europe's East is not a stable easily defined category (Janion 2006, Kalmar 2022). And yet, there is some commonality in the experience of being located in the region, albeit differently and in complexity, and being historically and continuously narrated as peripheral to Western

¹ Our website is: postceecom.wordpress.com

Europe, always lagging behind in achieving modernity and thus never recognised as fully civilised (Boatcă 2007, Kulpa 2014).

Historically, knowledge has been produced about the CEE region, and consequently about us, by Western scholarship and scholars. Europe's East - as it often is with those about whom knowledge is produced - has too often served as case studies but not necessarily been considered as knowledge producers. This is not one of those books. Here, we write from positions of situated knowledge, infusing our own experiences and relating stories of people in and around CEE whose languages we share and whose life experiences and identities to different degrees resonate with us. We write as scholars who all have either life experiences of migration or at least diasporic connections to the region of CEE. Our often 'unpronounceable' names have not always sat comfortably attached to bodies of scholars who produce knowledge and many of us have felt the differentiation in which our career progression has been tainted with a sense of overstepping one's place in the European core (Lulle 2021). Many of us have experienced being racialised as Eastern Europeans in the West where we are read as 'white but not quite' (Kalmar 2023), white enough to fit in and reap the benefits of our whiteness, but not white enough to claim space fully and feel at home (Narkowicz 2023). While there is space to express these grievances, we also need to remain vigilant as not to fall in the trap of complicity with Euro-American coloniality/modernity that Piro Rexhepi (2023) warns against in his recent book, at the cost of rooting our thinking firmly in the postsocialist present and theorising about the region 'from its margins' (p.155).

Indeed, we are now quite far removed from the precarious reality of many migrants from and within the CEE, or at its borders. What is more, many of us in this book are not only producing knowledge about our 'past selves', but we also produce knowledge about 'our' regions' own Others, for example Ukrainians in Poland (see Krivonos' chapter), Roma migrants in the UK (see Szewczyk et al.'s chapter) or migrants from Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan at the Belarus border (see Fiałkowska and Judzińska's chapter). Thus, while our biographies might still translate to us being in some ways marginal within the European core, most of the authors in this collection are not the marginalised Others within CEE. Although we think, write and produce knowledge about CEE migrants, amongst them racialised migrants, we are predominantly (but

not all) ourselves representatives of majority groups in our own national and regional contexts. So whilst we write from the margins of Europe in some respects (Loftsdóttir et al 2023) we are also writing from the centre in other ways. In contrast, racialised minorities across CEE are subjected to violence daily, whether they belong to long settled minority groups, like the Roma or the Tatars, the socialist-era migrants from Vietnam and across Arab countries, Black and mixed-race people or more recent migrants to the CEE who come as students, workers or family members, or refugees currently stuck at the EU's external borders in the East (Pędziwiatr 2011, Alamgir 2013, Bobako 2018, Judzińska and Sendyka 2022; Fiałkowska et al. 2023, Rexhepi 2023, Balogun 2024).

Notwithstanding these issues, we view the book as rooted in anti-racist and 'decolonial' perspectives. In that, this book builds on earlier scholarship that disrupts the dominant narratives about the CEE and does so from a perspective that counters and challenges the presumption of regional backwardness (Kuus 2004, Owczarzak 2009). In the last decade, scholarship that draws on postcolonial and decolonial insights into the CEE have sprung up as a critique to the ways that the region has been historically narrated as lagging behind and since 1989 seemingly on a never ending journey of catching-up with the West (Buchowski 2006, Janion 2006, Kulpa 2014, Tlostanova 2016, Todorova 2005, Zarycki 2022). CEE scholars have problematised the assumption, inherent in neoliberal capitalism, that marginalised populations always strive towards eventually becoming absorbed within Western capitalist modernity rather than draw on their own histories and experiences to build more equitable futures that could pose as an alternative to the racial capitalist system (Kušić, Lottholz and Manolova 2019, Rexhepi 2023). This edited collection is a continuation of thinking decolonially about Central and Eastern Europe, a project that several of our contributors are actively involved in through their own work (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022, Drnovšek Zorko 2019, Krivonos 2023, Safuta 2018).

That said, recognising that the term in itself has too often been instrumentalised rather than deeply engaged with, not all authors agreed that this book is necessarily 'decolonial'. As editors, we feel that an important aim of this book is to de-centre Western European domination in migration debates, studies and general knowledge production about the CEE but also about

migration and migrants. We want to push back against this with empirical perspectives from CEE by CEE scholars and activists that we feel are lacking in and across the region that have been nourished by in-depth theoretical work on decolonial thinking in CEE and now requires the theories to be applied. Even more so, critical work on race and racialisation in the context of migration and CEE inspired from decolonial perspectives have been sparse and we wish to fill this gap. As editors and authors, most of our work has been inspired by decolonial thinking and theories on postcoloniality, postdependence and decoloniality (Gawlewicz 2020, Nycz 2014, Tlostanova 2016) and we are indebted to the scholarship that came before us and shaped our thinking. Not situating this volume within decolonial perspectives would thus feel as an erasure and not be truthful to our journey as scholars. With that we acknowledge that with our positionalities and ways in which we are racialised, we are not representative of the regional differences across Central and Eastern Europe. Recognising this challenge, we trust that our commitment to a decolonial approach in this book will unfold through the collection of the texts it brings together.

Race, racialisation and whiteness

Race, racialisation and whiteness are central terms in this volume and our primary interest lies in how these processes manifest themselves in migrations from/to/within the CEE region. We understand racialisation as a process of ascribing racial meanings to groups of people to differentiate them along racial lines, normalise those differences and legitimise power relations that arise from them (see also Murji and Solomos 2005). The term signifies subordination stemming from historical, political and social production of whiteness as superior. It is a relational process, where hegemonic whiteness becomes the norm against which people, relationships and practices are ‘measured’, creating hierarchies of power and privilege (Keskinen and Andreassen, 2017). In this process, people are racialised in different ways, however while being racialised as white grants privilege and codes one’s body in a space as the norm, being racialised as non-white is attached to a host of negative attributes.

That lived experiences of migrants from, to and within CEE are distinctively implicated in racialisation processes is already clear from the small (but growing) body of work (e.g. Balogun and Pędziwiatr 2023, Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022, Lewicki 2023,

Narkowicz 2023, Rzepnikowska 2023, Safuta 2018). This collection takes further these emerging debates by exploring situated and complex ways in which race, racialisation and whiteness intersect *with* and *in* CEE migrations.

What's in a name?

What we found particularly challenging in developing this edited collection was how to relate to our area of study. Multiple terms have been used to refer to the region including 'Eastern Europe', 'Central Europe', 'Central East Europe', 'East-Central Europe' and 'Central and Eastern Europe'. Capital letters or a mix of capitals and lowercases have been used too and there are various disciplinary preferences as well as individual choices, reflecting the long-standing conceptual complexity and vagueness. Each of these terms is a discursive construct and they all convey certain understandings of the region. They cannot be equated as they refer to different histories, geographies and peoples (Kalmar 2023). They also relate to imagined spaces that are differently positioned in the hierarchies of power. Needless to say, neither of these terms is ideal.

The term 'Eastern Europe', for example, dating back to the 17th century (Wolff 1994), tends to denote the former Soviet area spanning contemporary Russia and some of its neighbouring states (Tlostanova 2019). However, in popular discourses in places such as the UK or the US, it is also used to refer to more central localities with socialist (but not necessarily Soviet) past such as Poland. This term has gained further meanings in the context of East-West migrations in Europe and beyond. The 'Eastern European' or 'East European' is a well-known label (and sometimes a slur) which tends to lump together all migrant populations denied the privileged Western status. It is unclear which populations specifically it refers to in terms of nationality, ethnicity or language background - it can relate to neither or all as its underlying purpose is to racialise those who are seen as cheap migrant labour (Lewicki 2023).

The concept of 'Central Europe' was developed in the 19th century to distinguish more centrally located geographies and emphasise their situatedness in-between the iconic (European) East and West (Agnew 2001, Kuus 2004). But in doing so, it is tainted with exclusionism and reproduces the problematic hierarchies of privilege and power given connotations with the historic, pan-Germanic *Mittleuropa* on the one hand (Neumann 1999) and the Visegrád Group, a more recent

politically-motivated alliance between Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, on the other (Kalmar 2022). Similarly, the concept of ‘nesting orientalisms’ developed by Bakić-Hayden (1995) draws attention to ways in which racialisation operates *within* the broader region of Eastern Europe (Karkov 2019).

The other terms are also imbued with confusion and contradiction, in particular in relation to which peoples, places or nation states they cover. It was - for those reasons - impossible for us (editors and contributing authors) to agree on a single term that would sit comfortably with everyone. As noted, throughout the workings of our collective we used the phrase ‘our region’ as a discursive proxy to describe the diverse populations and geographies that we study.

For the purpose of this volume, we decided on ‘Central and Eastern Europe’ abbreviated ‘CEE’. This was not an arbitrary choice. While this term shys away from problematising ‘Eastern Europe’ and ‘Central Europe’, and their relationships to the iconic West and each other (Janion 2006), it is the conjunction that, we feel, brings them together on equal terms, at least linguistically. In using this term, we intend to emphasise that we engage with a diverse region (historically, geographically, politically and socio-culturally) that has been produced and reproduced in different ways depending on *who* is speaking, *where* and to *what* end. Although the term is primarily used by academic communities, and lacks the snappiness of ‘Eastern Europe’, it seems to have all-encompassing qualities that we chose to prioritise.

However, it is not our intention to suggest that this term is superior to others and should replace them. We remain attentive to the fact that all descriptors of the region are not objectively given or discursively (or geographically or politically) stable. We believe that it is not our task to sanction them. Rather, as critical (migration) scholars, we should observe how they are constructed and re-constructed, what meanings they convey, who uses them and why.

State of the field and existing gaps

This collection comes out at a perfect time. We saw an increased interest in CEE and migrations (primarily) from the region between late 1990s and mid-2010s. Two independent bodies of work emerged over this time: 1) a relatively small one on decolonial approaches to researching CEE;

and 2) a sizable one on East-West migrations in Europe (dominated, at least initially, by Polish migrations to the UK).

The former grew out of attempts to apply postcolonial and postsocialist lens to explore the region (Červinková 2012, Chari and Verdery 2009, Kuus 2004, Tlostanova 2016, Mayblin et al. 2016, Owczarzak 2009) as well as critiques of doing so (Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012) that were particularly challenged by postdependence scholars (Nycz 2014) who called for the employment of a history-sensitive, ‘provincialised’ perspective. The scholarship that grew around them remained primarily theoretical (although see Gawlewicz 2020). The latter developed into a sub-field of global migration scholarship following unprecedented mobilities from A8 and A2 countries² to Western European places (Burrell 2009, Favell 2008, Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2020) but hardly engaged with race and racialisation (with notable exceptions including Tudor 2017, Nowicka 2017, Grill 2017). Interestingly, these two bodies of work developed largely in isolation from each other.

Decolonial scholarship in relation to CEE have in the last few years established itself firmly as a field (Manolova et al 2019, Mulaj et al 2020, Koobak et al 2020, Kumar and Narkowicz 2021, Rekhviashvili et al 2022, Rexhepi 2023, Vilenica 2023), and in the last few years brought to the fore exciting new scholarly work on the processes of race and racialisation in the region (Drnovšek Zorko 2019, Krivonos 2020, Kalmar 2023, Baker et al 2024).

While this emerging work marks a key development in thinking about regional migrations (and the region itself), two important gaps remain. Firstly, there are still few cross-cutting perspectives on migration, race/racialisation and CEE. There are noble exceptions, as we have already noted, several of them from contributors to this very volume (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022, Krivonos 2023, Narkowicz 2023, Rzepnikowska 2023). Secondly, much of existing work in its entirety rarely maps theories on race, racialisation and decoloniality onto empirical insights (e.g. collected in interviews, via discourse analysis or ethnography) and thus remains largely theoretical and detached from lived experience and policy. In this

²A8 (short for accession eight) refers to the eight CEE countries that joined the European Union in 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. A2 (accession two) refers to the two countries in the region that joined in 2007: Bulgaria and Romania.

collection, we address these gaps by focusing on racialisation processes in the context of migration from, to, and within CEE on the one hand and offering empirically grounded interventions on the other. The seven core chapters that we present are all based on research that prioritises migrant experience and voices via the employment of qualitative methods including in-depth interviews and ethnography. Our Foreword and Epilogue are written by scholars in the field that have accompanied our journey from the very first seminar on *PostCEE* geographies back in 2020.

Structure of the book

The collection consists of seven empirical chapters by emerging and established scholars of CEE, migration, race and post-/decoloniality alongside reflective Foreword and Epilogue by Hana Červinková and Ivan Kalmar. The empirical contributions focus on migrant populations from a range of CEE localities including Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Poles, the Roma and migrants stranded at the Belarussian-Polish border.

In **Chapter 1** Daria Krivonos travels to Warsaw at the height of the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine and, as a Russian speaker, is thrown into the provision of services on the ground for the thousands of refugees. Reflecting on the so called “exceptional response” to Ukrainian displacement and the racial violence simultaneously happening on the Polish border with Belarus, Krivonos questions the dominating narrative of “white” Ukrainians vis-a-vis non-white non-European asylum-seekers and untangles the various ways in which both groups are racialised through the production of what she relates to as “stratified subalternities”.

Chapter 2 continues the conversation on borders, whiteness and racialisation from the perspective of scholar-activists Kamila Fiałkowska and Natalia Judzińska from the Poland-based ‘Researchers on the Border’ group. Reflecting critically on the ethics of conducting research on the border and on their own shifting racialisation and differentiating degree of whiteness when supporting racialised migrants on the Poland-Belarus border, the authors bring us much-needed and yet rarely glimpsed into realities in the mediaeval Białowieża forest that has been a site of an increasingly hostile border spectacle forming up the Polish response to people stuck, injured and sometimes dying at the border.

Chapter 3 switches focus to CEE migrants in Western Europe. Adapting the well-known postcolonial phrase ‘we are here because you were there’ (Patel 2022), Drnovšek Zorko places the role of broader geopolitics to the lives of post-socialist migrants. Through three intersecting analogies and by interrogating the presence and absence of the Empire, she connects the postsocialist and the postcolonial through in-depth life stories of postsocialist migrants.

Chapter 4 continues exploring the lived experiences of CEE migrants in ‘western’ contexts by looking at how they navigate the highly racialised British class system. Through focusing on young CEE migrants, Budginaitė-Mačkinė and Blachnicka-Ciacek draw a compelling picture of the understudied intersection of class and race and emphasise its capacity to shape the sense of identity and belonging in post-Brexit UK.

Chapter 5 Drawing on findings from two collective projects by Roma and non-Roma scholars, Józwiak, Styrkacz, Szewczyk, Mirga-Wójtowicz and Garapich delve into the racialisation experienced by the Roma Polish community in Poland and after their westward migration to the UK and Germany. Rooted in an ambition to challenge the domination of non-Roma (Gadje) scholarship on the Roma, this chapter is an important contribution on a minority group in the CEE that continues to face disproportionate racial discrimination.

Chapter 6 shifts attention to Polish domestic workers in Belgium and Germany. Safuta, drawing on Wallerstein’s ‘world-system’ theory, illustrates how those ‘peripherally white’ migrants negotiate their both privileged and precarious position, which sometimes involves competing with non-white workers and presenting themselves as victims of historical injustice.

Finally, **chapter 7** returns to CEE geographies to explore how Polish highly-skilled migrants in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria negotiate the notion of ‘Eastness’ in relation to white privilege. Błahuta demonstrates how the changing migratory landscape in CEE opens up opportunities for white CEE migrants in the region to capitalise on their ‘fully white’ status.

Beginning and ending in the CEE region the empirical chapters come full circle and present a rich and nuanced portrayal of racialisation processes in contemporary CEE migrations.

We recognise that the collection is disproportionately focussed on Poland, with all empirical chapters engaging with migrants from or to this country to a smaller or greater degree. This is an important limitation of this book and unveils the challenge of de-centralising hegemonic

knowledge productions within the region of CEE. While the book reflects the position of Poland as a key immigration and emigration country in the region, at least at the time of writing this book (see Kaczmarczyk et al. 2020, Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022), it is not our intention to imply that Poland can be considered a proxy for CEE. We acknowledge that many regional peoples and places are missing in the collection and we look forward to many more contributions to come.

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