Victimhood as victory: The role of memory politics in the process of de-Europeanization in East Central Europe

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Abstract

To a large extent, the traditional narrative of EU integration has revolved around reconciliation and peace-building after the Second World War. This article examines how current memory work in nationalist movements in East Central Europe subverts this moral story and uses it as the basis for a politics of backlash against the EU. Recent developments in national commemoration and remembrance practices in the region have enabled not only the glorification of the national past but also the suppression of 'heretical' interpretations of specific traumatic historical episodes. As a result, the fault lines of national belonging are now used to eclipse stories of post-war state reconciliation in Europe and focus directly on the victimized population. As a result these commemorations carry strong normative and moral overtones related to justice and culpability. Nationalism in this context has received moral connotation and, vice versa, questions of morality become questions of nationhood. The 'we' of this distinguishing work embodies a subject of immaculate historical innocence and victimhood; by extension, the 'others' always bear responsibility and guilt. This nationalist moral classification work changes and reframes the moral underpinnings of the EU enlargement. The victim theme has adhered a strong potential to garner solidarity among various social groups in East Central Europe against the EU. The role of victimizer is easily projected onto both the abstract notion of the 'European elites' and the supposed allies of those elites: the internal 'others'.

1. Introduction

Public debates on European integration may once have been the expression of a 'permissive consensus', but in recent elections and referendums the EU has become increasingly politicised (de Wilde and Zürn 2012). Scholars now talk about a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009), growing polarization, and the emergence of opposing advocacy coalitions (De Wilde 2011). This is true in longtime EU countries as well as in the more recent member states in East-Central Europe.

What is striking about the more recent public debates in the latter region is the overwhelming presence of historical arguments, especially voiced by those who oppose (further) EU integration. In this region long-standing themes of national history seem to have become an inexorable attribute of opposition talk against the EU (Ágh 2016), a tendency that has become reinforced lately by more authoritarian styles of government (Tillman 2013), government-sponsored commemoration practices that celebrate events of national history pitting the nation against Europe (Milošević 2017; Rupnik 2007), and a surge of populist rhetoric surrounding those events. Obviously, revisionist history as a political strategy is not exclusive to East-Central Europe. It is also found, to a degree, among Western Eurosceptics – as has been the case in the rhetoric of the Brexit campaign, e.g., which also pitted the nation against the EU. But the way in which such arguments have been used and resonate in East-Central Europe tell us something about the specific functioning of anti-EU rhetoric in this cultural realm of the EU.

It is important to examine these specific renderings of Eurosceptic politics because its effects go beyond the realm of East-Central European domestic politics; in fact, they reach into the arena of international relations in the EU. In October 2017, for example, Poland's minister of culture Piotr Gliński, of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, accused the House of Europan History (HEH) — the EU-funded museum in Brussels that invites visitors to reflect on the history of Europe[1] — of not being fair to the national history of Poland. In a letter to the head of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, Gliński complained that the museum did not devote sufficient attention to famous Poles and showed the country as complicit in the Holocaust (Rankin 2018). This accusation came in the wake of other criticisms of the HEH by Polish politicians

[1] For a discussion on the history of the HEH, see (Kaiser 2017).

who — like some critics of historical museums *in* Poland[2] — appeared less interested in ideas about the study of history, creative curatorship and the museum as a source of learning than in defending the national flag.

In this essay, I want to examine this heightened political interest in the connection between national history, memory and EU membership. I focus primarily on governments in East-Central Europe, and my prime case for empirical exploration will be Poland. I argue that certain (nationalist) politicians (from self-declared mainstream parties) have deliberately brought talk about the EU onto the field of memory politics so as to make the *normative* overtones of debates about European integration more prominent. By doing so, they have attempted to flip the script of Europeanisation — with 'Europeanisation' here understood not simply as the transfer of policies from the EU to the level of the member state but as the process (and ambition) of norm diffusion within the EU. Spreading 'European norms', which encompasses both political and cultural 'encounters' (Flockhart 2010), has been a key strategy used by the EU to persuade candidate countries to adopt certain EU policies and practices (a strategy that has been explained and framed both in candidate member states as in the EU as a 'return to Europe'). Now a political counter-movement seems to have gained strength which highlights normative arguments too, but in this case as a means to *oppose* European integration without having to direct attention to the content (or usefulness, or desirability) of EU policies and practices. In other words, if Europeanisation in the context of EU enlargement led to a transfer of both policies and norms to the acceding EU member states, politicians in the latter countries, which in the meantime have become full-fledged EU member states, now seem to engage in deliberate de-Europeanisation; they actively oppose EU integration by relying on their own re-telling of history *and* by using a normative background to accomplish this re-telling.

I argue that there is indeed something new to observe here: even though Euroscepticism and opposition against the EU-integration is as old as the EU integration process itself, the grand underlying story of both economic and ethical progress was also always more or less the same. Opposing the EU did not mean questioning the story of the need for reconciliation and common prosperity. But now opposition against the EU has become an attempt to tell a competing story of what Europe is and should be —

[2] In 2016, Gliński criticized the expansive approach of the new Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and said it should focus more on the Polish experience (Donadio 2016).

a story that de-emphasises the need for reconciliation and instead highlights the need to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. This is done in particular by connecting political debates about EU policies and practices to perennial sensitivities in discussions about national memory. As I will show, several internal and external factors are at play in the rise of such instrumentalisation of national memory politics.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section I begin with outlining a key development in East-Central European political discourse around EU membership. I will highlight the effects of the conditionality politics on that discourse in the period before EU accession. I will then address some of the fundamental ways in which national political discourses on the EU (and the political mobilisations they have engendered) have changed since the EU's eastward enlargement.
In the second section I show how the theme of victimhood has come to occupy a prominent position in East-Central European national political discourse about the EU, and how the reliance on that (traditional) trope is directly related to the emergence of a politics of 'de-Europeanisation'.

In the third section I explore some of the main factors that have contributed to this particular form of de-Europeanisation. These factors are to some extent related to the ways in which national politics has developed and evolved in the domestic political arenas of East-Central Europe — including the emergence of problems of democratic fatigue, democratic decline and the 'enchantment of populism' (Brubaker 2017), which are not unique to this region. I also briefly go into other factors, including some factors related to historical repertoires of political mobilisation and issues related to the functioning of EU politics, structures and policies. I conclude with a few short remarks on the obstacles the EU is facing in trying to deal with the challenges of de-Europeanisation in East-Central Europe.

2. From using to abusing 'Europe'

Following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc many citizens and politicians in East-Central Europe regarded EU membership as an unique opportunity for achieving economic advancement (Baldwin, Francois, and Portes 1997). But EU enlargement was, of course, more than that. In the candidate member states as well as within the EU, ideas on the

spread of economic liberalism, active civil society and market prosperity were couched in a grander narrative of promoting democracy and freedom, European values, and ultimately, European unification. The EU not only proffered an institutional arrangement that supplemented, and potentially replaced, that of the independent national state, the discourses of EU accession also highlighted, and celebrated, the inherent international and globalised arrangements that came with the newly achieved market-oriented and democratic institutions. Moreover, they actively brought into memory the broader sociocultural and historical background against which this EU turn could be read: Europe's remarkable resilience at the end of a turbulent century and its ability to create internal reconciliation after violent conflict and cold war — a narrative that politicians have sometimes presented in the form an apology for the European failures and divisions of the past (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2012). In short, EU enlargement was not only a political and economic plan, it was also framed and experienced as a moral imperative — a return to peace and freedom that could simply be called a 'return to Europe'.

This tight coupling of specific political ambition and grand moral narrative resonated well in both existing and acceding member states. For existing member states it functioned as a powerful leverage to impact on national policies and structures in the candidate countries. Through accession conditionality, partnerships and negotiations the EU gained a unique level of direct and indirect 'transformative power' (Grabbe 2006), which it could apply to different policy areas to various degrees (ranging from specific demands on e.g. privatisation to broad requirements on e.g. respect for minorities and human rights). In the acceding countries the normative discourse was welcomed because it could be used to force the EU to deliver on its promises. As Schimmelfennig (2001) has argued, East-Central European countries invoked the larger (normative) 'return to Europe' narrative 'to demonstrate that these values and norms obliged the EU to admit them and that failure to do so would be an act of disloyalty to the ideational foundations of the European international community.'

Of course, there existed some nationalist opposition against EU membership in the candidate countries – the antagonistic narrative between the nation and 'Europe' obviously precedes the current crisis – but important to note is that many nationalists at the time *supported* EU membership. In the early 2000s, certain nationalist movements in East-Central Europe even brought the larger programmatic goals of European

unification in line with their own political agendas. In the run-up to the accession the EU provided nationalist politicians in East-Central Europe 'not only the institutional context but also, in some ways, the discursive resources and even incentives for the reconfiguration of political space in national terms' (Fox and Vermeersch 2010, 329). This 'nationalising' of political space through Europeanisation happened most strikingly in Hungary, where Fidesz, the self-proclaimed political voice of the Hungarian nation, began to campaign in favour of EU accession on the basis of the idea that such unification would provide the Hungarian nation across state borders a new (European) home. Similar narratives about symbolically uniting the nation through EU accession were also used in Poland. In the latter case, arguments in favour of EU membership were made as historical justifications for the redistribution of European funding to East-Central Europe or the call for increased protection against threats from the East. Polish politicians saw independence mostly as independence from Russia, and EU membership could therefore be cast as a guarantee for that independence. In other words, EU membership was framed as an argument for more national security. Such arguments served a rhetoric that aligned well with the ambitions of the EU about political unity and economic collaboration.

But it did not stop there. If this phase could be described as (nationalist) politicians 'using Europe', then what has followed is a time of politicians 'abusing Europe'. Domestic debates about the EU have been actively connected to obsessions of national history that are more antithetical to the foundational principles of the EU. Of course, the political debate in East-Central Europe already saw the presence of both strategic and ideological arguments for opposing the EU earlier, especially among radical parties (Kopecký and Mudde 2002), but the impact on mainstream politics only grew considerably at the time of accession. Once membership was secured, the nationalists who previously (symbolically) supported some level of unification across state borders (a 'Europe of the nations') now diagnosed the EU itself as a main threat to the nation.

In Poland, this shift was already visible at around the time of the accession and the first ascent of PiS.[3] One telling detail was, for example, the focus on the issue of land

[3] The first time PiS gained power was following the elections in 2005, the second time in 2015. In 2005 as well as in 2015, Poles voted in both parliamentary and presidential elections. In the 2005 parliamentary poll PiS gained 27% of the votes cast and became the largest party in the Sejm ahead of Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), which gained 24%. In that same year Lech Kaczyński

ownership. Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz (Jasiewicz and Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz 2004, 1052) point out that, although the topic was of secondary importance to the reality of EU accession, some Polish parties nevertheless kept mentioning it in their campaigns in the run-up to the accession referendum. EU accession was, in this way, turned into a symbolic debate about who owns (or should own) 'our' land. Later on, various politicians argued that the accession would provide an opportunity for Germans to buy land from the territories in the West of the country that had been 'regained' from Germany after the Second World War.

It is remarkable how much the use of historical arguments in EU criticism and anti-EU mobilisations gained traction in East-Central Europe.[4] In Hungary this happened after Orbán's Fidesz in 2010 managed to gain an unprecedented position in power — what followed in the two years after those elections has been called an 'illiberal turn' (Orbán has one several occasion voiced his ambition to turn Hungary into an 'illiberal democracy') and a form of 'constitutional capture', which was accompanied by a political rhetoric that focuses on values, culture, and the rhetoric of 'finishing the transition suspended in 1989' (Pap 2018, 38). Orbán re-used the 1848 slogan 'We will not be a colony!' as a grandiose, somewhat elusive and highly malleable claim for more sovereignty, which could easily be applied to create resistance to a wide variety of EU policies.

In Poland, a comparable power shift and reinforcement of the historical argument happened in 2015. Since then history-based criticism of the EU has arguably been even more common there than in Hungary; it even seems to have become the most prominent form of euro-scepticism. This stance is reinforced through certain commemoration practices.

Consider, for example, the ceremonies that were organised in August 2017 in Warsaw to commemorate the Battle of Warsaw (the decisive, unexpected and therefore

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won the presidential election. The PiS-led government did last only until 2007 — after early elections a new government was formed and led by PO. On 10 April 2010, president Kaczyński was killed, together with many members of the political elite, in the Smolensk air crash. In 2015, the parliamentary election was again won by PiS, which had previously (since 2011) been the largest opposition party. They gained 37.6% of the vote against the governing PO, which achieved 24.1%. Earlier that year PiS candidate Andrzej Duda had received the greatest number of votes in the presidential elections (34.76%), followed by incumbent president Bronisław Komorowski (with 33.77%), who ran as an independent with the endorsement of PO.)

[4] Wellings and Power (2016) argue that invoking and rejecting collective memories is also a much-used strategy by those who defend European integration, which may be the opposite side of the same coin.

often called 'miraculous' Polish victory during the 1920 Soviet-Polish war). While this was ostensibly a military parade for the purpose of honouring the soldiers who had died during those fights, the political speeches delivered on the occasion framed the Polish losses as a sacrifice with implications for current European politics. In his speech PiS Minister of the interior Antoni Macierewicz proclaimed the 'Miracle on the Vistula' the single battle that saved European Christianity. 'From this sacrifice grew a great victory', he said, 'something that will not vanish from world history'. He added that today 'the Poles are once again standing on the eastern flank to defend Europe. This is not a return of history, it is a continuation of history.'[5] Macierewicz relied on this historical continuity, i.e. the violent deaths of the past that are supposedly still can be called 'our own', to reinforce his political ideas on the need to build stronger and more outspoken 'Christian national states' in East-Central Europe. Such nation-building project were needed to oppose what he called the three great threats to Europe: Russia, the bureaucracy of Brussels and terrorism by immigrants.

Military commemorations and public holidays related to historical events are of course notoriously multi-interpretable and open to various forms of meaning-making. In fact, a story could be told about Polish commemorations that contrasts strongly with the political framings proffered by current politicians. I attended the 2017 ceremony for the 'Miracle on the Vistula', and I was struck mostly by the fact that it was rather poorly attended and therefore not a success at all. And the military parade the day after, which did attract large crowds, looked to me mostly as a fun holiday outing for families with children who waved Polish and EU flags with equal enthusiasm. But through the channels of the state media and framed by political rhetoric both events seemed massively attended ritualised performances of a form of Polishness that was irreconcilable with the project of European integration.

It is important to add here that the deep links that Polish nationalist politicians and media have drawn between Polish nationalism, memory politics and criticism of EU integration are not necessarily self-evident. In the 1990s, there were enough cases of pro-EU nationalism. And even in more recent times, pro-EU politics have occurred in nationalist electoral campaigns. In the pro-EU framing of the Civic Platform (PO,

[5] Quoted from Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej (Ministry of National Defence), http://m.mon.gov.pl/aktualnosci/artykul/najnowsze/pamiec-o-bohaterach-bitwy-warszawskiej-02017-08-14/

Poland's main liberal party), for example, EU membership has fairly consistently been portrayed as beneficial for the material well-being of the nation at home and the compatriots working abroad as well as for the international standing of the country.

But in a political context in which EU membership is accomplished and the traditional proponents of EU collaboration have been ousted from power, PiS has hardened its criticism of the EU, even in the face of domestic social unrest and harsh criticism from the European Commission. The gains in this domain have been consolidated (i.e., the country enjoys the benefits of a borderless Europe, can send workers abroad and finance national projects with EU funding), and nationalist governments can therefore more easily bite the hand that fed the country. They rely on campaigns that pit the nation against Brussels as one of its main enemies and one of its main external (and existential) threats. In this new narrative the EU is an ally of external others of the nation as well as of the institutional elites (not the 'people') accused of working in the interest of more powerful EU states. Memory politics has come to serve not only the nationalism that is concerned with establishing the (symbolic) borders of the nation (as was the case with the nationalising of political space in the pre-accession period, and the 'excommunicating' of certain (minority) populations from the nation) (Brubaker 2017); now it also serves to cement (electoral) support against (European) elites.[6]

Such a tendency can be called de-Europeanisation because it seeks to provide a direct response not so much to the specific policy ambitions of EU integration but to the normative discourses of Europeanisation, the narration of the 'new' Europe (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2012) as an enlightened answer to the dark disorder of the violent past. In the view of those who criticise the EU it is exactly this newer Europe that has created injustices for national states. In other words, de-Europeanisation invokes moral issues and historical reasons to oppose EU integration. The moral and historical reasons are framed in such a way that they override specific policy concerns. At the same time, the objective is not a total dismantling of the EU – far from it. The de-Europeanisation seems to rely on the (imaginary) view that it might be possible to roll back the EU's

[6] Brubaker (2017) sees this as the 'the tight discursive interweaving of the vertical opposition to those on top and the horizontal opposition to outside groups or forces. In both left and right variants of populism, economic, political, and cultural elites are represented as 'outside' as well as 'on top.'' This combination of vertical anti-elitarianism and horizontal opposition has a detrimental effects on marginalised groups, such as many Roma (Vermeersch 2017) who are seen as both on the side of the (transnational) elites and (non-national) outsiders.

powers – and therefore reassert the primacy of the national governments and allow no limits on national sovereignty – without losing the current (financial and political) benefits of EU membership. Such view has been rightly diagnosed as contradictory, naïve, and incoherent (Grabbe and Lehne 2018), but without a successful political force that is able to come up with an alternative pro-EU narrative that is broadly appealing, it will likely still function as an effective tool for electoral mobilization against the EU.

3. When victimhood politics becomes the politics of de-Europeanisation

What is particularly striking about the historical arguments that are now being used to voice criticism of the EU is how much they are built on the notion of victimhood. East-Central European criticism of the EU, for example, is often expressed in the context of commemorations of wars, and even when those wars have resulted in a victory of the national state, it is the losses of the nation that receive much more attention. This happens in Poland as well as in other places in the wider region. Hungarian nationalists of all kinds perpetuate the cult of Trianon (the treaty ending World War I which 'dismembered' Hungary), licking past wounds to justify future territorial claims. Schäuble (2014) has investigated the mythologies and images of victimization that pervade contemporary Croatia. Živković (2011) has studied the resemblance between accounts of victimhood across the former Yugoslavia. In other countries, too, the politics of victimhood often coincides with nationalist resurgence and a demand for dealing with a past conflict (Baumann 2013).[7]

In the case of Poland, the 'we' of nationalist memory politics has of lately often become a subject of moral character. Nationalism is not simply or only anymore about looking back, selecting glorious events, inventing a stable subject position, rewriting those events, forgetting the complexity of history and painting some sort of long-gone idealised past. Indeed, the most remarkable fact about the current fault lines of belonging is that they are not solely a matter of historical simplification, and not even

[7] Of course, this trend goes far beyond Eastern Europe and the Balkans: different experiences and remembrances of victimhood also continue to be a divisive force in e.g. Northern Ireland and South Africa, but there, of course, they are not connected to the European integration process.

solely a question of reinforcing the alleged root components of national identity,[8] but that they are drawn in terms of justice and responsibility. It is still an 'imagined community' but then imagined mostly as 'victimised' and therefore by definition 'innocent.' The idea behind such victimhood nationalism is not only to forget to see the protagonists of history as complex beings; it actively portrays its protagonists as moral units, entirely good or bad. And therefore, of the moral terms used in such simplified accounts, not only the concept of 'victim' but also that of 'victimizer' come to occupy a central position, even if it is not always literally mentioned. It is striking how, in current nationalist projects of forgetting in East Central Europe, victimhood is the prime concept that connects past to present, identity to strategic politics, and innocence to guilt. The nationalist 'we' is portrayed as a 'we' under threat by an identifiable external subject.

In other words, the nation is framed as a minority (i.e. always living in the shadow of some sort of majority). If the structure of victimhood politics is comparable to that of minority politics, the unspoken message is: *Even if you seem to be a numerical majority in power now, remember that you once were a minority under threat and therefore you may still be a minority under threat, even if you are a majority today.*[9] Such nationalism, in others words, mobilises populations by making them minorities. Elections seem a key factor in the creation of feelings of such false minority identity — precisely because the language of elections is the language of minorities against majorities. It is perhaps not surprising that the increasing popularity of such polarising moral politics happens at a time when there is an increasing push for authoritarianism. In other words, creating minorities serves as a way towards the creation of regimes that tend absolutise electoral victory and seek to delegitimise all political opposition against the victors of these elections.[10] Those in power call for extraordinary measures to protect the allegedly endangered national majority against the allegedly dangerous out-groups such as refugees or marginalised populations, which are presented in this story

[8] By which I mean the belief that a nation is the result of ancient origins and therefore produces particularly strong collective attachments.

[9] This is related to the sociopolitical phenomenon of predatory identities that Appadurai (2006) described: 'The discourse of these mobilized majorities often has within the idea that it could be itself turned into a minority unless another minority disappears, and for this reason predatory groups often use pseudo-demographic arguments about rising birthrates among their targeted minority enemies.'

[10] This is arguably also the reason why in times of rising populism winning elections seems to have become so extremely important, even more important than governing, and in Van Reybrouck's poignant wording, 'elections fever' risks becoming a 'chronic disorder' (Van Reybrouck 2018, 14).

not as a population at risk needing protection but as a risky population posing a threat (Vermeersch and van Baar 2017).

In this way memory work in nationalist movements subverts the original moral story of Europeanisation (of European integration as born out of reconciliation, stimulating diversity and providing protection for minorities) and uses it as the basis for a politics of backlash against the EU. Recent cases of national commemoration and remembrance practices have enabled not only the glorification of the national past but also the suppression of 'heretical' interpretations of specific traumatic historical episodes. As a result, the fault lines of national belonging are now used to eclipse stories of post-war state reconciliation in Europe and focus directly on the allegedly victimised population.

Such moral classification work easily permeates debates about a range of Europe-wide topics: refugees, minority protection, same-sex marriage, abortion, constitutional reform, economic policy, global geopolitics, etc. In other words, nationalism in this context receives moral connotations and, vice versa, questions of morality brought to the fore through EU integration are seen now as questions of nationhood. The 'we' of this distinguishing work embodies a subject of immaculate historical innocence and victimhood; by extension, the 'others' always bear all the responsibility and guilt. This nationalist moral classification work changes and reframes the moral underpinnings of the EU enlargement.[11]

In the Polish case contemporary victimhood politics includes such topics as the potential victimisation of Poles through ethnic heterogeneity and multiculturalism; the threat posed by Marxist multiculturalism and the EU for Catholic and Polish-speaking identity, and the potential loss of sovereignty. Past episodes of victimhood have been invoked to provoke feelings of anxiety.

In earlier versions of this discourse Polish nationalist campaigning regularly pointed to Russia as a traditional threat. Electoral programs suggested a Manichaean conception of the Polish political reality, which insinuated that some politicians had actively collaborated with Russia (in 2005, the PiS electoral programme read: 'The Poles have the right to know who served Moscow, and who fought for an independent Fatherland. Who was an executioner, and who was a victim' (p. 18 of the 2005

[11] This is not merely a matter of discourse but also of material culture, see e.g. Zubrzycki (2011).

programme of PiS). Such statements add to a more general attempt to keep the old division of the communist 'them' versus the anti-communist 'us' alive. Insinuations have been embedded in the larger idea of Poland as a suffering nation at the mercy of guilty foreign states. In 2015, for example, Waszczykowski (PiS), the then minister of foreign affairs, said in an interview with Bild that the former PO-led (pro-EU) government was 'Marxist' because it promoted vegetarianism, equal rights and sustainable energy politics. 'This has nothing to do with traditional Polish values,' he said, 'which are awareness of history, patriotism, faith in God, and a normal family life between husband and wife' (Rupnik (2017) discusses the case). European integration in this framing is associated with abnormality and of loss of religion, values and patriotism.

In recent times, Germany was often cast in the role of the main representative of the EU integration project as well as that of the most important historical enemy of the Polish nation. Examples are to be found in several recent commemorations and poster campaigns. Mention should be made here of the postcard campaign that ran throughout the summer of 2017, which invited citizens to send a postcard to veterans of the Warsaw uprising of 1944. The initiative was presented as an apolitical token of sympathy by the state and its citizens to be sent to the old heroes of the Second World War, but it would be difficult to see such action unrelated to campaigns that sought to accuse Germany for not having taken up responsibility for the destruction of Poland during the war. During the same summer posters were visible in Warsaw that demanded Germany to pay reparations. Some proposals by PiS MPs added fuel to the fire, such as the idea to replace the plaques in Warsaw from the 1950s commemorating the 'Polish patriots who died in the hands of the Nazis' with memorials that would name the victimizers not Nazis ('Hitlerowcy') but 'Germans' (Urzykowski 2017).

Recent electoral campaigns in Poland have not only seen a return of an obsession with particular episodes of history that have enabled a specific (nationalist) retelling of the past that could be connected to current politics; it has also rekindled an essentialised view of Polish (historical) national identity against cultural and religious 'others'. The existence of these others is itself then seen as of potential harm to Polish national unity, integrity and solidarity. Following the example of Fidesz in Hungary; PiS has re-engaged in a nationalist campaign on refugees. In 2015, Reuters (2015) reported that Kaczyński promised to refuse refugees on the pretext that they might carry parasites and 'diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for

a long time'. The previous PO-led government was accused by PiS of being guilty of taking sides with Germany on the distribution of refugees. The 'others' in the rhetorics of PiS were, therefore, not only portrayed as the allies of 'new' alleged threat (asylum seekers, who were now framed as non-Catholic invaders and potential terrorists) but also put symbolically on the side of the 'old' victimizer (Germany).

As is clear from the examples above, de-Europeanisation as a political stance and mobilizing doctrine is less concerned with the concrete policies of the EU than with the norms and historical narratives that have become associated with the EU. Even when the government opposes specific EU policy decisions, it frames that opposition in a normative and polarizing re-telling of history.[12]

4. Internal and external factors

Which factors need to be taken into account when trying to understand this rise of de-Europanisation as a political stance and mobilizing doctrine? One way of structuring the exploration is by distinguishing between external and domestic factors.
In the Polish case, party competition is an important internal factor (Stoyanov 2017). The way party politics has developed since the end of communism has contributed to the importance of nationalist campaigning as well as to the continuous reappearing of history — the divergent interpretation of key episodes and themes of the past — as a dividing line of political competition.

Krastev, e.g., has argued that Polish liberal politicians at the beginning of the transition period 'succeeded in marginalising and excluding anti-capitalist discourse as a preventive measure, but at a cost: the opening of space for political mobilisation around symbolic and identity issues' (Krastev 2018). David Ost (2006) argued more or less along the same lines: nationalist political forces in Poland have represented a

[12] My reflections on victimhood nationalism here obviously leave large parts of the question out of the equation. My focus here is on the 'supply side' (van Kessel 2013) of nationalist ideas. Conversely not on the side of the receivers — including those citizens and organisations who are mobilised to support nationalist politicians and presumably to some extend co-produce their discourse. There is sociological research about nationalist sentiments among European populations (Fomina 2017; Hjerm and Schnabel 2010), but the many questions that such empirical work brings up are far from solved. What explains people's openness to it? What is the social psychology behind their self-identification as victims of history? I cannot go into such questions here, but I want to signal my awareness of their complex nature as well as the continuing need to investigate them.

response to the anger of working-class populations — they have channelled, controlled and articulated labour discontent over the economic transformation by turning it into a radical nationalist discourse. The development of the Solidarność labor movement has, in Ost's view, been logically connected with the movement's refusal to mobilise around class cleavages.

Against this background of party competition around the 'nation' emerged fierce debate about how to deal with the heritage of the 'round table agreement' – the compromise agreement in 1989 that united opposition leaders and communists and therefore de facto ended one-party rule in Poland. Certain politicians successfully reintroduced the topic of the 'round table as treason' into more contemporary discussions. This was visible already in the first ascent to power of PiS. In a newspaper interview a few months before the presidential elections of 2005, Lech Kaczyński argued there was a hidden but abiding communist-based power structure in Poland. He defined his own position as one of moral rebellion against that structure: 'we differ precisely on the issue of moral values and on whether the system of interests that has dominated Poland since 1989 should be kept up' (Kalukin 2005).

When, in 2015 PiS gained power over both the government and the presidency, there were a number of factors that facilitated the use of the victim-victimizer frame as a central narrative code underpinning its victory. Discussions about how to deal with corruption scandals in which some of the former communist and former left-wing anti-communists had been involved made it possible to present the nationalist 'we' of PiS as the true inheritor of the non-state (and 'honest') 'we' of Solidarity. In addition, the victimized 'we' was a convenient role to play in the context of continuing fuzziness over the facts of the Smolensk airplane crash – and the continuous conspiracy theorizing about it (Żukiewicz and Zimny 2015), in which 'they' had deliberately caused the accident to 'us'. The role of the external dominating power could easily be projected onto the EU since it were the political opponents of PiS (PO and other parties before) who had been responsible for negotiating EU membership.

Apart from party politics there's also second domestic factor: moral categories have functioned as a long-standing discursive repertoire in Polish politics and they can therefore more easily be used to mobilise voters. There have been at least two times in the communist years when moral categories became part of the nationalist mobilisation. One example is the way in which in March 1968 suddenly Jewishness rose

to the foreground as a factor establishing a new dividing line between 'ours' and 'others', pushing people not only within re-defined ethnocultural categories but also in political camps. In March 1968, as the result of a blunt Anti-Semitic propaganda campaign, mainly led by one faction in the Polish communist party, thousands of people were dismissed from their jobs, mostly employees from the government institutions, university professors and journalists, and thousands saw themselves forced to emigrate (Kunicki 2005; Stola 2000). The communist party mobilised its 'own' intellectuals and workers to protest against 'the Zionists' (newspeak for Poles with a Jewish background who were considered not really Poles), so as to give the impression that this was a policy move that was spontaneously embraced by large sections of the 'ordinary' Polish population. The campaign was meant to quell student protests and reinforced and gave meaning to an (newly imagined) ethnocultural boundary; it forced people to choose on which side of the ethnocultural divide they were on a boundary that was simultaneously conceived as a political and moral divide.

Anti-Semitism was not only used to undermine student protests (by accusing protesters of acting in the interests of a homeland outside Poland) but also to cleanse the state institutions from liberal reform-minded communists (who were seen and portrayed as external agents) and thereby shift the public's attention away from intellectual demands for freedom of speech and democratization.

Another example are the protest movements of the 1980s, when there was a strong undercurrent of Catholic nationalism that mobilised large sections of the populations for Solidarity and against the communists. This was, of course, in the first place a civil society protest against communist dictatorship, but it was also a nationalist enterprise that pitted 'we' against 'them' in terms of ethnocultural identity (Poles against Soviets), religion (Catholics against secularists), and morality (good versus evil). This was a framing that even non-believers could subscribe to because, as Adam Michnik formulated the matter, the people were 'convinced that the system wasn't run by Poles' (Michnik 1998, 268). The terms 'we' and 'them' thus acquired a specific ethnic and moral meaning that survived the 1980s and became revitalised in the current context. Like the striking visual symbols of the Solidarity movement (Weschler 2006),

the words 'we' and 'them' were widely readable and recognisable. And they have continued to function as symbols.[13]

These examples illustrate how current nationalism in Poland re-uses the dichotomy of victimizers and victims. As Lim (2010) has suggested, victimhood becomes hereditary and consolidates national solidarity (and enmity) beyond generations.

The third domestic factor that is worth taking into account here is the general rise of disappointment with democracy — democratic fatigue — which in itself interacts with and reinforced by populist mobilisations, especially in non-urban areas. This creates a political context in which symbolic issues, such as nationhood, may move to the center of political competition. This is especially the case when populist mobilizers can rally against an all-encompassing political consensus which is seen as a constrain to the public debate, such as, for example, the perception that there is 'no alternative' to radical economic liberalisation or to EU membership. As Grzymala-Busse and Innes (2003, 66) have argued: 'With so few choices in public policy to be had as a result, politicians in the region had little alternative to appeals to 'who they are' and their own credible skills rather than to substantive policy commitments when distinguishing themselves from their competitors.' This could explain to some extent why mobilizers have been more likely to frame their campaigns in the rhetoric of exclusionary nationalism when they are faced with a field where all moderate parties more or less pursue similar policy proposals. In order to make the difference with competitors, symbolic position — like the historical victim-victimizer division — is given more attention.

Rising populism in East-Central Europe goes hand in hand with democratic decline. The current Polish government has not only attempted to influence (and politicise) people's understanding of history and EU integration, it has also redesigned a number of institutions and constitutional arrangements that strongly diminish the opportunities for the opposition (Krastev 2018). PiS has, among other things, increased its grip over the country's broadcasting system and pushed for the appointment sympathetic judges on the constitutional court. It is important to note that PiS's attempt to cement its power in government, which could be described as an attempt at

[13] See, for example, the book by Teresa Torańska about Polish communist leaders, simply titled 'Them' (Torańska 1987).

constitutional revolution, has met more popular resistance than that of, for example, Fidesz in Hungary. Not only have there been more protest demonstrations in Poland, the PiS majority in parliament has also been more limited than the one Fidesz had in 2010, so it has made constitutional capture harder to accomplish.
External factors contributing to the popularisation of historical arguments and the victim-victimizer frame include the depoliticized (and highly normative) narrative of the European integration that usually accompanies a political defence of the EU. By having been both a depoliticized technocratic and bureaucratic project and acting simultaneously as moral agent in the enlargement process, some authors (e.g. de Búrca 2018) see the rise of technocratic institutions, and therefore the EU itself, as a contributor to the current problem. Through conditionality, the candidate countries were confronted with the hard constraints of accession, a list of things that needed fixing before they could join the European club. These constraints had the effect of flattening political differences that might otherwise have taken shape along a left/right axis. In its place, the 'nation' and its history of victimhood re-emerged as a convenient fulcrum for inter-party contestation.

5. Concluding remarks

What can EU institutions do about it? It is clear that these institutions are legally extremely limited in their action against those governments who do not uphold the values and principles of the EU. When opposition relies on countering the traditional historical narrative of EU integration, the scope for action is even more limited. Moreover, the political instrumentalisation of faulty or simplified historical images and narratives by nationalist politicians in the domestic realm is unlikely to be remedied by a competing political instrumentalisation of historical accounts by EU institutions. A victimhood attitude that dominates all political relations can most likely not be opposed directly by a negation of the victimhood frame. Such correction would most likely only be instrumentalised as further evidence for tendencies of victimization from abroad. In addition, several EU institutions have relied on their own moral narratives to propagate integration, a strategy that might be turned against the EU's own interests. Here the limits of EU-rope become quite visible. As (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2012, 398) write,

'self-critical narratives about a 'bitter past' can become the foundation of European superiority expressed in ambitions to 'teach the world'.' This is indeed how the enlargement process has been experienced in East Central Europe. During their accession to the EU candidate member states engaged in, what Krastev and Holmes (2018) have called, a game of imitation -- in terms of policies but also in terms of norms and readings of history -- and therefore created a backlash. They write: 'the rise of authoritarian chauvinism and xenophobia in Central and Eastern Europe has its roots not in political theory, but in political psychology. It reflects a deep-seated disgust at the post-1989 'imitation imperative,' with all its demeaning and humiliating implications' (Krastev and Holmes 2018, 118).

Of course, some of the trouble might be countered by better education. It is the task of good historians — and of good historical museums — to break petrified clichés and correct (politically) accepted historical knowledge on the basis of facts. Such corrections are important not only because of what they correct but also because they can demonstrate that history is never fully finished and should therefore never be left unexamined. But an open and fair public inquiry into history is only possible in a democratic climate that is not suppressed by authoritarian tendencies. In other words, the argument for better historical knowledge and the strategies against 'victimhood olympics' as a mode of political mobilization will have to be also an argument *for* democracy and *against* democratic backsliding. And in this field, too, EU institutions are limited. As Schlipphak and Treib (2017) have argued, intervention from abroad against anti-democratic political forces in the domestic realm might produce unwanted effects. 'By criticizing the EU for illegitimately interfering with domestic affairs, the government may frame EU intervention as a threat from the outside and present itself as the only safeguard against this threat' (Schlipphak and Treib 2017). More fruitful approaches may be found in separating the discussion about EU policies from the discussion about the worth of more general values of democracy, education and human rights.

The successes of nationalist victimhood politics today are often connected to the failures of democracy. Put differently, the belief in an imagined nationalist past might be the result of the lack of a belief in a democratic future. One part of the solution therefore might be to rethink, adapt, change, and reform the ways in which ordinary citizens participate in democratic politics. The solution will not only be a matter of educating or

reframing the past, it's also lies in creating a new belief in democracy and moving away from the tyranny of the majority.

This is an important task ahead. De-Europanisation through memory politics has already created real detrimental societal effects for democratic European societies, particularly for those who are already minorities such as many refugees and immigrants, who are now portrayed both as guilty and privileged subjects (because they are seen as allies of the EU, not of the 'ordinary people' of the nation). When nationalist ideas of victimhood are translated into a policy that seeks to establish both ethnocultural homogeneity and historical 'justice', certain target groups run the risk of becoming the subject of further oppression and exclusion. In other words, the political powerholders who think of themselves as representatives of a victimised majority seeking justice may become responsible for instigating new injustices themselves. Through their mobilisation of electoral support on the basis of the idea that the majority population consists of victims who are threatened, they themselves are increasingly becoming a threat to democracy. They may, in the end, become the ones who victimise.

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