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Working Papers

European Centers and Peripheries

in the Political Novel

27 January 2025

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European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel

When analyzing asymmetries between centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, literary scholars draw on various theoretical and methodological traditions, such as post- and decolonial approaches or, as, for example the Warwick Research Collective (2015), world-systems analysis. Some of these literary scholars rather emphasize asymmetries and exchanges between (the) European center(s) and non-European (semi-)peripheries, while paying less attention to how global economic centers such as Europe – whatever its boundaries may be – are marked by internal center-periphery-dynamics (e.g., between Germany, or France, and Eastern Europe). Additionally, sociological approaches in world literature studies (e.g., Casanova 2004; Moretti 1998, 2000) focus on examining center-periphery dynamics in literary fields, or systems, and highlight how these dynamics influence literary form. They supplement approaches that analyze how specific literary texts represent center-periphery-asymmetries.

This collection of working papers builds on these lines of inquiry, yet organize its discussion around the question of how center-periphery-dynamics are articulated in explicitly political terms by the political novel, a genre tentatively understood here as a set of procedures through which a novel is coded and decoded as political within a particular constellation of circumstances, resulting in its recognition or misreading as political. The papers aim to put special emphasis on examining Europe as a combined and uneven formation characterized by economic, social, cultural, and literary asymmetries. They investigate the question of what formal and textual features are common, if not typical, of literary capitals (centers) on the one hand and margins and peripheries on the other, as well as the question of how literary centers and peripheries respond to political novels – and how these literary texts, their authors, publishers, and reading publics anticipate, react to, and interact with these responses. Further questions that the papers address include:

- To what extent are interrelations between different kinds of centers, semi-peripheries and peripheries represented in the political novel?
- Which topics are particularly relevant to and which aesthetic forms are particularly suitable for literary negotiations of economic, political, social, and cultural centers and peripheries?
- How have center-periphery-dynamics in the literary world-system and in the European literary field in particular affected aesthetic manifestations of the political novel in different European literary regions and in different historical contexts?

- How do the specifically European spatial and literary relations interact (uncover, reflect, problematize, counter, resist) with the relations between Europe and other regions across the globe?

- Can the political novel be used as a resource to develop a better understanding of Europe as characterized by economic, political, social, cultural, and literary asymmetries?

- How does it reflect processes of European integration and disintegration?

- Which theoretical and methodological approaches are particularly helpful to discuss center-periphery-dynamics in and around literary texts in Europe and beyond?

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Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas.
The Case of a Romanian Novel

This study is based on the observation that political ideas circulating in Romanian society are reflected in Romanian literature, offering a critical analysis that contributes to a more documentary understanding of the current situation. Furthermore, spatial representations have established a coherent framework for the development and explanation of the ideology that has shaped literary characters, presenting subtle, and at times grotesque or caricatured, masks of political figures from the era. For this research, we propose a brief analysis based on the Warwick Research Collective's theory of *"*Combined and Uneven Development,*"* (WRS 2015, 32) highlighting the evident relationships within the Romanian context that have shaped the literature of the early century and beyond.

Thus, we will consider the Romanian space as a semi-periphery, as understood by Stephen Shapiro, with our analysis aiming to extract a possible functional model from the general theoretical scheme through a discussion of the political novel. As stated, *"*[u]nlike many models that describe and evaluate culture in the binary terms of a host metropolis and target colonial hinterland, a world-systems understanding looks to the semi-peripheries as the locales wherein combined and uneven development occurs in ways

that are more complex and explanatory than can be provided with only a simple core-periphery framework" (Shapiro 2024, 46).

This excerpt discusses the concept of semi-peripheries in world-systems analysis, highlighting their role in combined and uneven development, compared to a simplistic core-periphery analysis. Therefore, the aim is to discuss how the center-periphery relationship coalesces, going beyond the binary power dynamics and highlighting various other connections that can be observed through the study of literature, particularly the novel, which reflects social changes. Applying this perspective to the situation in Transylvania and Bucharest at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries reveals several relevant aspects. Transylvania, as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1918, intersected diverse imperial and ethnic influences, acting as an area of influence for both Vienna and Budapest and as a semi-periphery economically and socially, with varied levels of industrial and infrastructural development. In this situation, we can identify what is named "the mixture or collision of residual (latent, potential, seemingly virtual, or pneumatic) with emergent elements, or what we will explore as the dynamics of combined and uneven development" (Shapiro 2024, 20).

Romania's interwar period was marked by significant economic growth, leading to the formation of a wealthy class of industrialists who played a crucial role in the country's economic modernization. These individuals invested in factories and infrastructure, facilitating the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The "urban villagers"[1] category represented a large part of the urban workforce, consisting of migrants who moved from rural areas to cities in search of better living conditions. This group was

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[1] For a discussion on the "urban villagers", see Bako 2024.

essential not only for supporting the urban economy but also for maintaining the link between rural and urban culture, creating a symbiosis between tradition and modernity. The Romanian novels of the early century abound with such characters that reflect inevitable social changes.

In a country where traditional elements (agriculture and rural society) coexist with modern influences (industry and urbanization), one can observe a dynamic interplay between the old and the new that is mirrored in the evolution of the Romanian novel. The residual influences of traditional society manifest in economic modernization, which retains characteristics of rural life and cultural-agrarian customs. These elements not only shape the personal identities of characters within the novels but also contribute to broader themes of national and regional identity. In many narratives, authors explore the tension between the nostalgia for a simpler, agrarian past and the rapid changes brought about by urbanization and industrial growth. The process of *combined and uneven development* highlighted in the socio-economic context resonates within the Romanian novel, as it creates both tensions and opportunities for character development, narrative innovation, and thematic exploration.

Although elements are integrated into modern discourse, they are not merely revived in their authentic form; rather, they are adapted and reinterpreted to fit new social and economic contexts, demonstrating a process of cultural recycling. This concept is particularly evident in the works of Romanian author Liviu Rebreanu, whose novels explore the complexities of modernity while deeply rooted in rural traditions. The assertion that "this cultural recycling is a secondary processing of the archaic in a modern form by a semiperipheral faction" (Shapiro 2017, 37) emphasizes that this process of integrating

traditions into modern discourse is not accidental but conducted by semiperipheral groups – those communities at the intersection of global influences and local traditions. This brings into discussion the connection with the novel, which, as a literary form, can explore these themes of cultural interaction.

The choice of the political novel as a case study for our discussion is based on two arguments: One is related to the fact that the Romanian novel has sparked numerous theoretical discussions, with critics like Ibrăileanu, Ralea, Lovinescu, and Călinescu highlighting how the necessity of the Romanian epic genre was formed.[2] Meanwhile, the way society receives its reflection in literature recalls Honoré de Balzac's famous assertion in 1842, at the opening of *La Comédie humaine*: "French society was to be the historian, I had only to be the secretary." (Balzac 1968, 6) But society is also a cultural construct that emerges from literature, which becomes a reflection of reality: "On one hand, the novel has become a manifest tool for constructing a nationalist "imagined community" (Anderson 2016, 45). On the other, the novel, often consumed in intimate spaces and modes of undress, was used to decipher interiority and personal development" (Shapiro 2024, 43).

Thus, we can observe that the nation emerges as a cultural product, much like religion, rather than merely a political construct. This perspective emphasizes the idea that national identity is shaped by cultural narratives, shared values, and collective experiences, rather than being solely defined by political boundaries or governance. Nonetheless, the nationalist narrative corresponds to what Anderson, in his work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2016),

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[2] For a possible model, see Bako 2023.

termed "imagined communities" (Anderson 2016, 12). In his view, nationalism has become a powerful force in recent centuries, contributing to the formation of modern nation-states. Anderson suggests that nationalism was a solution to the decline of other forms of social association, such as large universal religions and loyalty to multinational empires. The spread of print capitalism, which enabled the mass production of written texts (books, newspapers), played a crucial role in creating these imagined communities. Through access to the same news and ideas, individuals began to share a collective consciousness, even without direct interaction. The novel contributed to this complex cultural construct, especially considering the literary reflection of political configurations throughout the 20th century.

Our choice of Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Răscoala* (*The Uprising*)[3] is motivated by such assertions, elaborating a strong and impactful relationship between a semi-peripheral space and the central European one. The excerpt, taken from the final part of the novel, condenses the importance of this type of analysis, highlighting a global network with subsequent discontinuities:

> My boy, what you saw in Argeș was a parlour joke compared to the orgy of cruelty and barbarity that has befallen all the villages in the country since they took over!... Those shot or generally killed by the repressive expeditions are the happy and fortunate ones, because they have escaped the dreadful crushing. In the end it was a colossal bloodbath, the like of which has not been seen anywhere else in the world in the last century, not even in the colonies or with the savage tribes. And all quietly, lest Europe and the world should know (Rebreanu 1975, 405).

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[3] Unless stated otherwise, translations are by the author. For a translation, see Rebreanu 1964. Although this translation was completed in 1964, I preferred the updated translation of the excerpts. See Rebreanu 1965.

The excerpt highlights the intensity and brutality of the repression associated with the uprising, using terms such as "orgy of cruelty and barbarity" and "colossal bloodbath" (Rebreanu 1975, 405). It addresses the violence and oppression imposed by the authorities, even comparing them to colonial atrocities to implicitly criticize the landowners and authorities who allowed such acts to suppress the uprising. Presenting this violence as unprecedented, even in the context of "savage" colonies and tribes (Rebreanu 1975, 405), amplifies the negative perception of the Romanian authorities. The reference to concealing this violence from the eyes of Europe and the world suggests a critique of the propaganda and censorship used by oppressive regimes to maintain control and avoid international criticism.

Another aspect of this discussion is that *The Uprising* was considered by Romanian critics to be a social novel, within a typology where Rebreanu's only political novel is *The Gorilla*. However, the loose definition of the epic genre allows us to classify *The Uprising* also as a political novel, particularly because of the ideological cores that could be discussed. There has been much discussion, especially about the postwar Romanian novel concerning totalitarian regimes, but a discussion has been omitted that could also clarify the evolution of the narrative.

In the preface to the *Dictionary of the Central-European Novel of the 20th Century*, Adriana Babeți notes an important aspect, directing the discussion towards politics: "[I]n Central European countries — between the consolidation of national identities in the 19th century and the emergence of national literatures, there is a fundamental connection (...) these literatures served as support in emancipatory political battles and were often used

as tools of 'nation pedagogy'" (Babeți 2022, 52), linking early-century narratives to historical and implicitly political pressure.

Liviu Rebreanu – Ideologies: The "Peasant Problem" and the Voice of the "Subaltern"

Rebreanu's novel *Uprising* published in 1932, reflects the social tensions and political ideologies in Romania against the backdrop of Europe's last peasant uprising. Part of the interwar series of novels, it explores Romanian and international political realities, from observing political contexts to parliamentary discussions and strategies to suppress the uprising. The novel is notable for its documentary realism and narrative innovations, structured in two parts with the titles: "The Country is Moving!" ("Se mișcă țara!") and "The Fires!" ("Focurile!"), each containing twelve chapters.

The central social conflict pits peasants, living in precarious conditions due to land scarcity, against landowners and leaseholders, reflecting tensions between the rural population and the ruling class. This conflict extends to the whole society, raising issues of social crisis and the search for political solutions. The parallelism between rural and urban environments is emphasized by the contrasts between urban "luxury and joy" (Rebreanu 1975, 75) and rural "fears" and "unrest" (Rebreanu 1975, 75).

At the heart of the political debates in *Uprising* is the "peasant problem", a syntagma that marked the ideology of the beginning of the twentieth century and a topic of discussion among the political parties of the time, reflecting the agrarian reality of Romania where peasants owned insufficient land for survival. This situation was exacerbated by the

drought of 1887 and subsequent famine, the authorities' inaction, and massive grain exports. The novel's realism is supported by historical documents, including gendarmerie reports on the movements and events of 1907, providing an accurate picture of the social, economic, and political context of those times. The "peasant issue", crucial for Romania's future, is highlighted through the character of Miron Iuga, a landowner sensitive to the peasants' needs. The voice of the peasants is the voice of the subaltern, previously a "vox clamantis in deserto," unable to be heard by the "center".

In the political context of the period, the novel notes that conservatives supported maintaining the agrarian economy, while the national-liberals promoted a system of loans to assist the peasants. Rebreanu introduces characters such as lawyer Baloleanu, who becomes prefect and justifies harsh repression in the name of order.

Titu Herdelea, a character who came from Transylvania to Bucharest, symbolizes the idea of national unity and expresses solidarity with the peasants, questioning why they have not been granted the lands they cultivate. Rebreanu depicts the peasant uprising as driven by the desire for land, with peasants, in their fury, burning crops and manors, symbols of oppressive power.

The fluctuating political life is illustrated through the party conflicts, with the government accused of exterminating peasants. Political changes are portrayed as being dictated by momentary interests, and demagoguery becomes a tool for accessing power without attention to the true needs of the peasants. Rebreanu portrays the state as ensnared in a cycle of interests, threatening its very existence. King Carol I, in his speeches, seems detached from the population's real sufferings, while the novel, in its documentary dimension, suggests a lack of vision by the authorities in the face of a major

agrarian crisis. The uprising preceding World War I anticipates an escalation in the agrarian conflict, with scenarios of violent repression proposed as solutions.

Discussing this novel emphasizes that political and cultural ideologies are not just abstract theories, but are used strategically to support and legitimize existing practices and structures. Thus, ideologies become tools through which power relations are maintained and consolidated. From this perspective, the novel *Upraising* is an exploration of how political and cultural ideologies are used to support and legitimize social structures. Rebreanu depicts these ideologies not just as abstract theories but as tangible instruments in the hands of the political and economic elite. Thus, conservatives support maintaining the traditional agrarian economy, while liberals promise reform through credit systems, with both positions essentially trying to preserve or modify power structures for their benefit.

The peasant uprising in the novel thus becomes a manifestation of the conflict between these ideologies and the social realities of the peasants. The violent actions of the peasants — burning manors and destroying crops — are a direct challenge to the oppressive structures supported by political ideologies. Through his characters, Rebreanu highlights how ideologies are instrumentalized to control and exploit the agrarian workforce, reducing their needs and demands to mere issues of public order.

The novel also observes how political ideologies are used by elites to maintain unequal power relations, contributing to uneven and combined development. *The Uprising* becomes a commentary on how hegemonic discourses legitimize not only economic systems but also the fundamental asymmetries in the social structure of a

nation caught between tradition and modernity, turning culture into a battlefield for domination and social supremacy.

The narrator's eye, functioning as a cinematic lens, captures the contrasts on the journey: "Then came the dirty suburbs, ramshackle houses, potholed streets, violently contrasting with the splendors that heralded palaces farther away" (Rebreanu 1975, 13). This is a clear representation of the social and economic contrast between rural and urban settings, a central aspect of uneven and combined capitalist development often found in semi-peripheries. This literary representation highlights class discrepancies and how modernity and tradition coexist tensely. Spaces are thus landmarks of clashes between social classes, with major discrepancies. Architectural descriptions serve as background for this idea: "The building itself, a multi-story structure, attractively ornate, commanded attention mostly due to its red marble staircase guarded above by a giant gleaming glass shell" (Rebreanu 1975, 18). Grigore Iuga's house, with its ostentatious decorations, symbolizes the prosperity and power of the dominant social class. Details like the red marble staircase and the giant glass shell emphasize the privilege and resources available to the elite, representing those who economically and symbolically dominate the urban landscape.

"And nobody can protest, nobody dares to shout because at stake are the interests of the country and because the interests of the country demand that so many millions of peasants work hungry and naked to procure a few thousand thieves the wealth to be squandered in luxury and lust!" (Rebreanu 1975, 19). This statement suggests the existence of a system where the wealthy elite exploit peasant labor to sustain their extravagant lifestyle. The use of the term "thieves" to describe the privileged implies a

moral condemnation of their actions, highlighting the perceived immorality and corruption inherent in the system. The reference to the interests of the country underscores the ideological manipulation of nationalist sentiments to maintain the status quo and justify the exploitation of the lower classes.

In the context of nationalism and imagined communities, this manipulation transforms the idea of the nation into an instrument of control. The ruling elite uses nationalism to build an "imagined community" as defined by Anderson (2016, 12), where their interests are presented as synonymous with those of the nation. Thus, opposition is suppressed and labeled as unpatriotic or harmful to the entire country. By presenting exploitation as a national necessity, the elite legitimizes its power and discourages any form of resistance, thus consolidating its position and control over society.

The passage from *The Uprising* discussing the citizenship of the character Titu Herdelea reflects the shaping of communities formed at the intersection of various empires, as analyzed through the concept of 'inter-imperiality'[4] by Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă. Titu, coming from the region of Transylvania, which joined Romania only in 1918, finds himself in a transitional space, caught between Romanian cultural identity and an unclear legal status. National identities and loyalty to the state are often influenced and manipulated by the socio-political conditions of imperial borders. In this context, nationalism acts as a tool for creating imagined communities, where belonging and identity are dictated not only by culture but also by the political structures that govern these border territories.

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[4] See the study regarding interimperial statement in Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022.

Nationalism becomes a force of both unification and exclusion, as individuals like Titu are characterized as potential threats if perceived as falling outside official definitions of the nation. Also, in semi-peripheral societies, such as pre-1918 Romania, these tensions between rural and urban areas deepen, influencing and reinforcing developmental disparities. Urban areas tend to more rapidly adopt modernizing and nationalist influences, while rural areas often remain anchored in traditions and are more directly affected by inter-imperial policies: "Don't forget, dear, that you are not a Romanian citizen, no matter how much more Romanian you think you are! So as soon as you become a danger to public order, you will no longer be a brother, but an enemy and then..." (Rebreanu 1975, 302) is the main discourse that characterizes the border situation for Titu.

The peasant class is seen as a manipulable entity, capable of being used as a tool to gain advantages. Negotiations were conducted in ordinary terms, but when political factors intervene, an imbalance occurs.

What he told me the poor man couldn't believe. With the peasants, he would have got along as he did before. But at the closing of the covenants he mentioned with the prefect, who told them not to give up to be deceived by the Jewish tenant and better to let him to run away. Listen, prefect, you urge the peasants to run away from the tenant! People so much so that they started to set fire to the manor, to kill the cattle and all the other bastards... And why do you think the prefect weaned them? Out of hatred against the Jews? I would! A brother-in-law of his was going around renting out the estate and couldn't. Now, if he drove out the Jew, he thought they'd take advantage of his kindness property. Only the reckoning was the other way round, that the peasants then rose up to divide between the land (Rebreanu 1975, 9).

Although the prefect attempts to manipulate them by exploiting ethnic conflicts and antisemitism to achieve personal and class interests, the peasants' response — burning the manor and sacrificing livestock — demonstrates a form of collective resistance against exploitation and injustice, reflecting an increasing class awareness and an aspiration for social justice. The prefect's intervention serves as an example of manipulating *cultural hegemony* to maintain the power of the elite. While the official presents himself as a defender of peasant interests, his motivations are deeply rooted in class interests. Simultaneously, an analysis of the depiction of the peasants reveals the presence of residual elements that can create a potential for local counter-hegemony or alternative hegemony. Thus, the uprising can be viewed as part of a broader movement for social transformation, exploring and developing cultural elements that could be utilized for a viable local counter-hegemony.

Conflict between generations: theories, methods, new education

The conflict between generations, between Miron Iuga and his son Grigore illustrates an ideological struggle between conservatism and progressivism. Miron, as a representative of the older generation, is deeply rooted in traditional methods and the experiences accumulated over decades, possessing a strong confidence in practical knowledge and time-tested approaches. He views change as a threat to existing social structures and considers alternative approaches to be "feminine" (Rebreanu 1975, 14) and ineffective. This conservative viewpoint is grounded in the belief that authority and traditional methods are the most effective means of governance and social organization.

The young man is scared. He understood that his father is living in another world or doesn't want to give to realize the reality. He told him everything he had he had only had time to find out what he had learned. Who knows how to read some of the grievances that threaten to turn into a fire. He asked to let him try to find his own way out of it, to try to come to terms with the peasants. The old man refuses. He was convinced that Grigore, with his feminine methods, would make things worse. He was so confident in his own experience and knowledge of people, that he would have considered himself demeaned if, in the very days of trouble, he had disavowed his means of experienced efficacy in three decades, and had passed on to a young man with a head full of theories (Rebreanu 1975, 14).

On the other hand, Miron's son, educated abroad, has been exposed to modern ideas of tolerance and freedom. His European education emphasizes dialogue, negotiation, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, contrasting sharply with the authoritative approaches of the previous generation. The son advocates for an approach based on understanding and reconciliation with the peasants, reflecting the influences of his modern education. He believes that resolutions lie in efforts to address conflicts through dialogue and compromise.

This clash of ideas and methods not only provokes familial and social tensions but also serves as a driving force for change. The influence of European education leads the youth to adopt perspectives and methods that differ from those of their parents, aiming to innovate and improve social relationships through more humane and democratic practices.

Another character embodying such attitudes is Stelian Halunga: "He was a nice young man, lively, intelligent and handsome, with several years of agricultural practice in Germany and several years of successful management of a large state model farm. – There he is! His name is Stelian Halunga..." (Rebreanu 1975, 306) Stelian Halunga is described like the ideal candidate to take on an important position in the agricultural sector

in Romania. His education and experience in Germany provide him with the necessary skills to implement modern agricultural techniques and management practices in Romania. This reflects the desire to adopt Western innovations to improve productivity and efficiency in the agricultural field. The decision to return to Romania after studying and working abroad shows a commitment to his home country and a desire to contribute to its development. It is an example of brain gain, where young people educated abroad return to apply their knowledge for the benefit of their nation. Halunga's choice symbolizes modernization and progress. His presence brings a breath of fresh air and a new perspective, essential for the evolution of the agricultural sector. He is seen as an agent of change who can positively influence the community by applying the modern methods learned abroad.

Suppression of the revolt. The foreign king

When it comes to the repression of peasant revolts, the Romanian government expresses distrust toward the peasant soldiers, indicating a crisis of loyalty that suggests a distancing between the rulers and the ruled. This phenomenon is common in times of unrest and social upheaval, reflecting the characteristic tensions of a semi-periphery where internal authorities fail to inspire trust and stability. The situation described reveals the role of the army and the influence of foreign powers in maintaining order, emphasizing the elite's dependence on external interventions to manage internal crises.

The idea of appealing to the Austrians for pacification highlights the internal political weakness and dependence on foreign powers, showcasing a crisis of sovereignty.

The situation is further complicated by the presence of a foreign monarch, perceived both as a neutral mediator and as a symbol of external influence that limits national autonomy: "Around Bucharest, there was a secret rumor that the army was no longer safe and that, eventually, the Austrians would have to be called in for true pacification. It was said that even the new government did not trust the peasant soldiers, but it doesn't want to call for help before making a supreme attempt" (Rebreanu 1975, 214).

The government's decision to make a "supreme attempt" (Rebreanu 1975, 214) before seeking external help illustrates an effort to assert its authority and sovereignty, even while likely recognizing the chances of failure given the prevailing mindset of the army and the population. This hesitation reflects a desire to demonstrate the capacity to resolve conflicts internally; however, the dependence on an external solution remains a necessary option.

Paris and Berlin, visions of semi-periphery

The novel emphasizes how liberal or subcultural currents from major centers like Paris or Berlin often influenced by social and class liberation movements, have the potential to challenge and modify existing conservative cultural, social and economic norms.

The Parisian capital is referenced in Rebreanu's novel, highlighting the influence of the arts in shaping social life and entertainment, particularly through the character of Nadina, the wife of Grigore Iuga. "It had, only for November, the opening of the Parliament, the performances of Eleonora Duse and Feraudy, in addition to the Paderewsky concert.

He'd brought a little something from Paris when he returned ... but he noted with horror that, in the face of the multitude of events that had claimed him, she was in fact undressed" (Rebreanu 1975, 185). Nadina is captivated by the luxurious atmosphere of Paris, and her attitude serves as a pretext to observe how international influences, such as those from French capital, infiltrate local culture and shape behaviors.

> The owner, a man from a distinguished noble family who squandered a vast fortune in Paris and has recently cobbled together the establishment from the remnants to occupy himself, receives his clients personally and ceremoniously, much like a lord welcoming guest to an exclusive reception. (…) Nadina smiles with delight and repeatedly exclaims:
> — *Ah, oui, c'est vraiment très chic, très parisien*! A Spanish dancer, in a reserved area, accompanied by a special ensemble of Spanish guitarists, spins with a temperament that resonates with the piercing vibrations of castanets. The orchestra continues for a while with melodies from Madrid and Seville and then fades away in the wake of the dancer, making way for a pianist who preludes sleepily and nonchalantly, preparing for the entrance of a French chanson singer: charming, elegant, and very pampered, who is received with frenzied applause by the discerning audience (Rebreanu 1975, 203).

These excerpts illustrate an interconnected European cultural network that emphasizes themes such as cosmopolitanism, cultural consumption, and the influence of European capitals on the intellectual and artistic lives of the characters. The character of the owner, who once spent his fortune in Paris and now manages an establishment, reflects the cultural and social mobility within the European elite. Paris is seen as a cultural and financial center that influences lifestyles and social structures far beyond its borders. Nadina's appreciation for Parisian chic underscores the widespread admiration for French culture and fashion, with Paris depicted as the epitome of elegance and style — a benchmark for sophistication.

The inclusion of a Spanish dancer accompanied by Spanish guitarists, followed by a performance from a French songwriter showcases the cultural exchange and fusion that are characteristic of the broader European cultural network. Frequent references to Paris and detailed descriptions of cultural events and performances highlight the interconnectedness of Europe's cultural capitals.

Another space that constitutes a form of hegemony is Berlin, the city where Grigore Iuga completed his studies: "He returned from abroad with a head full of bold plans and sure solutions for all difficulties. The old man listened to him a few times without getting angry, as Grigore expected. He told himself that such generosities were the stuff of youth and that the boy would be content when he bumped his head against the threshold. Instead of fighting his 'theories,' one day he told him that he would be happy if he liked Tudor Ionescu's daughter" (Rebreanu 1975, 50).

Amara is the space where the character returns from the center to the periphery. This transition reflects the movement from an urban environment, often associated with progress and modernity, back to a rural or semi-peripheral space imbued with traditional values and struggles. "Then back to Amara with the rest of the money, which will be enough for current needs until the corn is sold. He was tidy and meticulous. That's all he had made of his two years in Germany. He had drawn up his home program in every detail. He had his grain policy in his pocket, due tomorrow. He considered it pure gold. The signature of Romania's most important grain exporter was respected throughout Europe" (Rebreanu 1975, 83).

Analyzing this passage from the perspective of combined and uneven development theory highlights not only the outcome of a professional training journey but

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also the complexity of economic and social relationships between different regions and actors in Romania and Europe. Grigore returns to Amara with a detailed plan for managing agricultural products, after spending two years in Germany that allowed him to refine his skills and develop a "grain policy" that both reflects the technical and strategic knowledge he acquired and suggests an aspiration towards modernization, characteristic of a development regime aligned with European norms and standards.

The idea of combined and uneven development is evident in the fact that, while the young man has had opportunities for training in Germany, many agricultural communities in Romania, such as Amara, continue to be influenced by limiting economic and social conditions. Although he can benefit from the knowledge gained and the reputation of Romania's leading grain exporter, there exists a broader reality of the Romanian economy that may be vulnerable to market fluctuations and external policies. The reference to "the signature of the most important grain exporter in Romania," (Rebreanu 1975, 83) respected throughout Europe, suggests a relationship of interdependence among the various economies in Europe, as well as an asymmetry in the bargaining power of local actors in the face of the global market.

> Explanations and considerations followed. Exceptional times. Prices fell sharply on foreign markets in recent weeks, almost collapsing. Unexpected Russian competition fell into the balance; the muscatel harvest, from where it had looked compromised, suddenly came up archaic. Russia is always full of surprises. He wouldn't have minded that. He, a far-sighted merchant, made all the arrangements in good time. But it was the railways that made him miserable, as they could not carry out the transports when they had to (Rebreanu 1975, 46).

The mention of these exceptional times and the collapse of prices in external markets suggests significant volatility affecting traders, particularly in the agricultural industries, which are sensitive to supply and demand. The merchant's frustration with the railway infrastructure failing to fulfill its critical transport duties on time underscores the importance of infrastructure in the economic development process. When such infrastructures are inefficient or insufficient, economic efficiency is compromised, and traders face significant losses.

This situation reflects an uneven development within the country, where certain regions or sectors benefit from better-developed infrastructure while others are left behind, thereby impacting overall competitiveness. The disparities in infrastructure quality can exacerbate inequalities, making it difficult for less developed areas to compete effectively in both domestic and international markets. Consequently, this not only highlights the need for improved infrastructure investment but also emphasizes the broader implications of uneven development on economic resilience and growth.

The narrative explores themes such as the impact of foreign education, generational differences, economic challenges, and the integration of European markets. These themes are interwoven with personal relationships and the pragmatic concerns of managing estates and businesses. Grigore's son education in Germany fills him with modern ideas and confidence. This reflects the belief in the transformative power of Western education and its potential to modernize and improve traditional practices in Romania. The older generation, represented by Miron Iuga, views Grigore's ideas with a mix of skepticism and tolerance. This highlights the ideological clash between traditional wisdom and youthful optimism inspired by foreign education. The novel addresses the

volatility of agricultural markets and the impact of international competition on local economies, a documentary reality mirrored in literature. The reference to Russian competition and the fluctuating prices illustrates the challenges faced by Romanian grain exporters in a globalized economy. Inefficient infrastructure, such as unreliable railways, exacerbates economic difficulties, despite strategic planning and foresight. Miron Iuga's pragmatic approach to generational differences is evident in his suggestion that Grigore considers a marriage alliance. This reflects a traditional strategy of consolidating wealth and power through familial ties. The narrative juxtaposes the modernizing influences of foreign education and market integration with traditional practices and skepticism. This tension is emblematic of broader societal shifts occurring in Romania during this period, as the country grappled with modernization and its implications for social and economic structures.

The novel: circulating ideologies

The first conclusion that emerges is related to the circulating ideologies, including nationalism, which emerges as a fundamental mechanism for maintaining identity and cultural unity, a mark in *Uprising*. In this novel, nationalism plays a crucial role in shaping national consciousness, emphasizing the need for cohesion in the face of external oppression and difficult social conditions. This ideology serves as a binding agent that unites various social groups around a common ideal of self-determination and sovereignty. Through the characters who discuss identity and belonging, Rebreanu illustrates how national values become essential for preserving a sense of unity in the context of a society

fragmented by inequalities and conflicts. It reflects the aspirations of the marginalized and serves as a vehicle for articulating their struggles, reinforcing collective identity in environments characterized by economic and social disparities.

The critique of the "epidemic of balls and parties" (Rebreanu 1975, 257) in Bucharest reflects a detachment of the elite from social realities, becoming a destructive ingredient for national cohesion. This decadence is correlated with the bourgeois values that social critiques challenge, emphasizing the need for cultural unity to counterbalance political fragmentation. In this sense, nationalist ideology becomes a promoter of cultural unity, deemed vital for the collective identity of the Romanian people.

> The idea is spreading more and more. I do not judge; I merely observe. Meanwhile, the agitation among the peasants is progressing in parallel... No, no, do not regard these matters with disdain. Perhaps it doesn't affect you, but the agitation is a reality. Maybe it is precisely this that has allowed the idea of expropriation to take root—I cannot say for certain. Nor do I assert that the danger is imminent. I don't know. But it exists. And in such moments, one can no longer think seriously about purchasing estates. The land has become a questionable asset until the situations are clarified. So… Do not be distracted by the perpetual feast-like atmosphere in Bucharest. This is a sign of illness (Rebreanu 1975, 257).

The passage highlights the growing awareness and acknowledgment of peasant agitation as a significant social reality, urging a consideration of its potential implications for landownership and societal stability. The contrast between the perceived superficiality of urban life in Bucharest and the underlying unrest serves as a warning that a façade of prosperity may conceal deeper issues.

The second aspect pertains to the collision between urban elites and rural communities in Rebreanu's narrative. In *Uprising*, the opposition between urban elites, who benefit from the modernization of the infrastructure and economic opportunities, and the rural peasants, who face poverty and social injustices, underscores the existing social and economic tensions within Romanian society. This dichotomy illuminates the disparities in power and resources, highlighting how the urban elite often lacks an understanding of the realities faced by the rural population. The urban elites are portrayed as somewhat detached from the struggles of the peasants, reflecting a broader pattern of inequality that compounds the challenges faced by those in rural areas.

Thirdly, the need for agrarian reform, as articulated in *The Uprising* underscores economic inequalities and the radical challenges posed to property structures. The demands for agrarian reform reflect a profound desire to correct existing economic and social imbalances, a movement arising from a semi-periphery that aspires to contest the existing social order.

The circulating ideologies and their impact on social movements, as evidenced by the discussed excerpts, underscore the critical role of the peasant revolt as a symptom of the struggle for social justice and agrarian reform. This movement is seen not only as a reaction to economic constraints but also as a manifestation of the desire for wealth redistribution, which can provoke a radical change in land ownership. The populist or socialist ideologies that influence these movements indicate a profound tension between the landowning class and the peasants, highlighting how social agitation serves a function of economic justice within the national context.

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Uneven and Combined Development in the Centre of Modernism:
Beckett, Joyce, London and Dublin

Response to Alina Bako:
"Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas.
The Case of a Romanian Novel"

In this response to this Alina Bako's overview of uneven and combined development within the modern literary scene of Romania, I merely want to pull out a few threads and, in combination with the Warwick Research Collective's thinking, consider unevenness within works that might seem central to modernism but which are also inflected by postcolonial paradigms. By so doing I hope to tease out how the experience of inter-European colonialism might feature in a consideration of the political novel.

Alina Bako describes Romania in the early years of the last century as a quasi-postcolonial state that has recently emerged from centuries of Ottoman domination. Looking to the centre of capitalist Europe for its template for modernization, Romania appears to be lagging behind those centres in terms of cultural and economic progress. Perhaps correctly, Bako argues that the urbanization of Romania is a crucial prerequisite of the modernisation of cultural modernity and notes how, with the aid of the automobile, the archaic, rural Romania remains within that moment of modernity. In doing so, Bako succinctly captures the notion of uneven and combined development

which the Warwick group develops. What I wish to add by way of confirmation or complication is the mark of uneven and combined development within the metropolis itself. As the Warwick Research Collective remarks, "we will treat the novel paradigmatically, not exemplarily, as a literary form in which combined and uneven development is manifested with particular salience" (2015, 16). Indicating the plasticity and hybridity of the novel form makes it ideal for the incorporation of "other non-literary and archaic cultural forms" (2015, 16), the Warwick group opens up the possibility of the central and the peripheral, the modern and the archaic, the urban and the rural existing within the same literary space.

In an early novel by Samuel Beckett, the phenomena of combined and uneven development within London – the colonial metropolis par excellence – can be discerned. *Murphy* was Beckett's first published novel (1938, but written in 1936) and was very much influenced by Joyce with whom Beckett was friendly in Paris throughout the early 1930s. Indeed, Beckett's move from Dublin to Paris, as that of Joyce before him, could very easily be taken as a movement from the peripheral to the central, as Casanova argues in *The World Republic of Letters:* "Because he found himself in the same situation that Joyce had twenty years earlier, Beckett took exactly the same path […] following Joyce in his exaltation of Dante and his sarcastic suspicions of the Celtic prophets" (2004, 319*). Paris, as the "denationalized and universal capital of the literary world" (2004, 34) was therefore the somewhat inevitable literary centre to which Beckett and Joyce were drawn. However, the metropolis within *Murphy* is not Paris, but London: one of the three cities – the others being Dublin and Paris – that Casanova sees as the "tripolar configuration of Irish space" (2004, 319) of Yeats, Shaw, Joyce and Beckett, and others.

Murphy is set partly in Dublin but mainly in London as we see a host of eccentric Irish men and women cross the Irish Sea to pursue Murphy who has himself moved to London notionally in search of his fortune. Beckett himself also had to move to London from Dublin in order to pursue a course of psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion as psychiatry was not allowed within the increasingly Catholic influenced Irish Free State. In *Murphy*, the eponymous hero takes himself to the cockpit in Hyde Park in order to enjoy his lunch of assorted biscuits. He there meets Miss Rosie Dew, a mystic suffering from duck's disease, accompanied by her dachshund, Nelly. Miss Dew and Nelly are in Hyde Park to feed the sheep:

> The sheep were a miserable-looking lot, dingy, close-cropped, undersized and misshapen. They were not cropping, they were not ruminating, they did not even seem to be taking their ease. They simply stood, in an attitude of profound dejection, their heads bowed, swaying slightly as though dazed. Murphy had never seen stranger sheep, they seemed one and all on the point of collapse. They made the exposition of Wordsworth's lovely "fields of sleep" as a compositor's error for "fields of sheep" seem no longer a jibe at that most excellent man. They had not the strength to back away from Miss Dew approaching with the lettuce (Beckett 2009, 59).

As Julie Campbell identified (2013), this is not some flight of fancy on Beckett's part as during the 1930s sheep were regularly used to keep the green spaces of London trimmed. So much so, that the sight of a flock of sheep in the centre of the imperium was not an uncommon one. The inclusion of the sheep in Hyde Park in *Murphy* is evidence that archaic forms of rural life were simultaneous with modernization and urbanization even within the very heart of imperial London to which Beckett and other so-called peripheral figures flocked.

Indeed, this sense of combined and uneven development was already well present within Beckett's precursor, James Joyce, especially when one considers the topography, history and discourses within the Martello tower at the start of *Ulysses*. The tower itself is not insignificant as it was built to defend against an invasion by Napoleonic forces and therefore serves as an expression of British hegemony. No less significant is Mulligan's, possibly ironic, claim that this small tower is the Omphalos, or the centre of the world. The fact that Stephen Dedalus and Buck Mulligan share the tower with the Oxfordian Haines who is keen, in a rather anthropological piece of patronizing romanticism, to immerse himself in a pure Irishness, points to a complex interpenetration and inter-interpretation of the cultural periphery and centre within a colonial milieu. Amongst all these discourses surrounding the central and peripheral, the question of Stephen's taste in tea arises:

> O, jay, there's no milk.
> Stephen fetched the loaf and the pot of honey and the buttercooler from the locker. Buck Mulligan sat down in a sudden pet.
> —What sort of a kip is this? he said. I told her to come after eight.
> —We can drink it black, Stephen said thirstily. There's a lemon in the locker.
> —O, damn you and your Paris fads, Buck Mulligan said. I want Sandycove milk (Joyce 1992, 13).

Stephen, lately returned from a failed exile in Paris, is moving towards the cultural forms of the centre, even in the face of the rural forms embodied in the form of the Sandycove milkwoman:

Old and secret she had entered from a morning world, maybe a messenger. She praised the goodness of the milk, pouring it out. Crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field, a witch on her toadstool, her wrinkled fingers quick at the squirting dugs. They lowed about her whom they knew, dewsilky cattle. Silk of the kine and poor old woman, names given her in old times. A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean, a messenger from the secret morning. To serve or to upbraid, whether he could not tell: but scorned to beg her favour (Joyce 1992, 15).

But least we should think that such a simultaneity of the archaic and the modern – the Sandycove crone and the aspirant Parisian artist – is only a feature of the peripheral in relation to the centre, later Stephen claims that the centre has always been marked by its own peripheral. The National Library of Ireland, in the very centre of Dublin, is the site where Stephen expounds his theory of *Hamlet*, which is arguably a text at the very centre of English literature. The library itself also bears traces of the shifting concrete realities of the centre and periphery. The grand, neoclassical building, with its Rotunda housing the reading room, opened in 1890 and is reminiscent of the reading room of the British Museum, which is itself reminiscent of classical Greek and Roman public architecture. Perhaps not incidentally, the architect of the National Library, Thomas Newenham Deane, was educated at the English Public School, Rugby. It is in this multilayered setting that Stephen reminds us of the uneven and combined development within Shakespeare's own historical moment: "Elizabethan London lay as far from Stratford as corrupt Paris lies from virgin Dublin" (Joyce 1992, 240). Before it was the centre of Britian, and then the Empire, England was already peripheral to itself. It took a Dubliner – on the periphery of both the political and literary centres of his day – to point this out.

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Reimagining Political Peripheries in
Pišťanek's and Boldizar's Siberian Slovakia

Near the end of the Cold War era, the historian William Pietz found parallels between representations of the former colonial world and the socialist countries in Western discourse: "the function of Cold War language as substitute for the language of colonialism raises the question of the comparability and actual continuity of colonial and Cold War discursive structures." Western scholars depicted the Communist system in opposition to democratic values, drawing on Orientalist tropes: "The basic argument is that 'totalitarianism' is nothing other than traditional Oriental despotism plus modern police technology" (Pietz 1988, 55-58). Pietz's article received relatively little attention within the then-emerging field of postcolonial studies and it was not until almost a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union that David Chioni Moore's article "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?" brought renewed attention to this comparison. Moore describes societies of the former "Second" (Communist) world as "extraordinarily postcolonial" and points out "how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact," crediting this oversight to "the belief… that the First World largely caused the Third World's ills, and an allied belief that the Second's socialism was the best alternative" (Moore 2001, 114). He describes the desire in these countries for popular culture "as a

return to Westernness that once was theirs," along with a rejection of "Easternness", adding that "this headlong westward sprint… prevents most scholars of the post-Soviet sphere from contemplating 'southern' postcoloniality" (Moore 2001, 117-118). Another two decades later, after Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine prompted a wide-scale reassessment of Russian colonialism among Slavic studies scholars, Moore returned to the topic in a follow-up essay, in which he notes that the widespread adoption of the term "postcolonial" occurred "at the same time that the Eastern Bloc and then the Soviet Union fell apart, the Cold War ended, and the already precarious worldwide socialist project largely collapsed" (Moore 2024, 43). Nonetheless, "When post-Soviet topics make a rare appearance in postcolonial studies venues, the essays are written only by scholars native or connected to the post-Soviet region. The fleeting post-Soviet is thereby sequestered, and has not (yet) reshaped postcolonial assumptions" (Moore 2024, 52).

One of the earliest post-Soviet novels in Central Europe was Peter Pišťanek's *Rivers of Babylon* (1991), which follows the rise of the hotel boilerman Rácz to power and wealth through his use of brute force during the chaotic postsocialist transition. The title (in English in the original) is not only a Biblical reference but through its connection to the song of the same name, it also alludes to the spread of Western pop culture in the former Communist states, one of the most visible characteristics of this social transition. Peter Darovec has described Pišťanek's work as "a revolutionary novel in its poetics, [which] even anticipates, to an almost visionary extent, the fundamental changes in Slovak society during the turbulent 1990s, which at the time the novel was written had not yet become apparent" (Darovec 2025, 91-92). Pišťanek followed it with two sequels, the latter of which, *Fredyho koniec* (1999, translated as *The End of Freddy,* 2008) features

an imaginary community of expatriate Slovaks in the oil-rich "Junjun" archipelago in the Arctic. According to Robert Pynsent, this third volume "concerns itself with Czech-Slovak relations, Slovak nationalism, but also Czech nationalism-cum-imperialism, and Czech arrogance toward the Slovaks, and towards the rest of Europe" (Pynsent 2000, 100). The fictional relocation of Slovak identity to remote Siberia also appears in *The Ugly* (2016), the first novel by the Slovak-Canadian émigré writer Alexander Boldizar. Its protagonist is a member of the Slovak "Ugli" tribe that had settled in Siberia during the Russian Revolution, left behind by the Czechoslovak Legion that fought against the Red Army and eventually helped to found the First Republic. Among the reviews linked on Boldizar's personal website is Poornima Apte's from *Booklist*: "Boldizar's debut successfully recognizes the chasm between youthful idealism and the reality it's often mired in."[1]

As the Warwick Research Collective has noted, Pišťanek's *Rivers of Babylon* "affords a critique of that instantaneity where the leaps and accelerations of capitalist 'development' leave large and unbridgeable gaps between the new business elites and the masses in the urban peripheries and rural hinterlands" (Warwick Research Collective 2015, 118). Boldizar's *The Ugly* might similarly be described in the collective's terms as a "novel of combined and uneven development," and despite being written in English by an author in Canada, it reflects his background in the literary periphery of Europe through its parodic self-representation of imaginary Siberian Slovaks.

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[1] Boldizar recently published his second novel, *The Man Who Saw Seconds*, a science fiction thriller.

Although Darovec refers to the first volume of *Rivers of Babylon* as a "revolutionary novel" that "graphically evokes a specific historical period," he points out that paradoxically "it is not an explicitly political novel. In fact, it shows almost none of the revolutionary events that dramatically changed the state of the country in late 1989 and early 1990. […] These socio-political processes lie outside the viewpoint of the characters surrounding Rácz" (Darovec 2020). Robert Pynsent has described Pišťanek's trilogy as a revival of the Slovak comic tradition: "His dominant mode is satire, and his devices belong to that mode, the grotesque, parody, the burlesque, and vulgar language […] For Pišťanek, Thatcherism-Blairism, like Marxism-Leninism is moral weakness posing as strength, and he aims his hyberbolic satire more frequently at capitalism than socialism" (Pynsent 2000, 89-91).

According to Darovec, *The End of Freddy* received a mixed critical and popular reception due to Pišťanek's decision to shift his primary focus from the Bratislava underworld to a broader satire of global capitalism: "Pišťanek's extension of the novel's space drives the characters to another continent, to another climate zone and actually even further […] a significant part of the plot takes place in a fictional country, characterized as post-communist and post-Soviet, an archipelago somewhere in the far north" (Darovec 2020, 176). Pynsent views the third novel more positively as a "Czechoslovak" text reflecting the political relations between the two nations after their separation: "Pišťanek appears both to satirize [Slovak nationalist historians] who maintain that the Czechs treated Slovakia as their colony and to satirize the Czechs themselves for their supercilious approach to the Slovaks. . . The chief target of his hyperbolic satire on Czech politics is Masarykian messianism and, perhaps, most of all the version of this

messianism embodied in the politics of Václav Klaus" (Pynsent 2000, 104-05). The broad

range of Pišťanek's political satire can be seen in the fact that Pynsent sees allusions

both to the founding father of the multinational Czechoslovak state (Masaryk), and to the

Thatcherite prime minister (Klaus) who represented a cynical counterpart to the idealism

of Václav Havel.

When the title character of *The End of Freddy,* the pornographic film producer

Freddy Meštánek visits Prague with his friend Urban, he feels "engulfed" by the Czech

language:

> "You prick," he addressed Urban with his last bit of energy, "why do you speak
> Czech to them, when you're a Slovak?"
> "Because it's a foreign language," responded Urban. "In London I don't try to
> communicate in Slovak, either. In Vienna I speak German. So why would I risk
> being misunderstood? I speak Czech, so I use it."
> Freddy looked at him with glassy eyes. […] He didn't like those bloody Czechs
> (Pišťanek 2008, 29).

Later in the novel, following a number of setbacks, including being abandoned

by his wife, Freddy is contemplating suicide when he sees a political discussion on TV:

> A Czech foreign affairs expert is explaining how it happened that a long time ago
> Slovaks settled Junja beyond the Arctic Circle. In the 19th century many Slovaks
> left to find work in America. A Junja Khan took advantage of this by chartering a
> ship in Hamburg onto which he lured Slovaks by charging only half price for a ticket
> to America. Once on the open sea, the ship turned out to be a slave trader taking
> them to Junja. […] He sold them all to the Junjans and they used them for slave
> labor. […] Junjans realized that if they gave Slovaks freedom, and let them do what
> their typical Slovak industriousness and inventiveness leads them to do, they
> would get more profit from them. […] In the 1930s Russian communists got to
> Junja. They set up a puppet Soviet government that […] founded reindeer, fishing,

and hunting cooperatives. Ethnic Junjans, who were lazy and thus understandably charmed by communist ideas, headed these cooperatives. After the fall of communism and the Soviet Union, the Russians left Junja. Since then, the two main ethnic groups have been at daggers drawn. There are many more Slovaks, who thus have an indisputable right to govern (Pišťanek 2008, 189).

Freddy decides to travel to Junja disguised as a journalist, but actually to join the Slovak guerilla fighters in the civil war. He is mistakenly reported as killed in the fighting and becomes a national hero, but he is in fact captured by the Junjans and held hostage as a Slovak spy. Taking on a new identity as the guerilla leader "Telgarth," he actually does become a heroic figure.

As in the previous volumes of the trilogy, Pišťanek overtly rejects high literary style, although as Rajendra Chitnis suggests, he "does not so much replicate as embellish the vernacular of the world he portrays [by using], for example, highly literary Slovak, urban and rural non-literary Slovak, the Americanized Slovak of a returning émigré, archaic Slovak and grammatically and idiomatically correct Czech not for verisimilitude, but to claim these different 'languages' as his own" (Chitnis 2005, 51). As the narrator himself explains in the text:

> The Junjun Slovaks' native language is Slovak, but an archaic nineteenth-century Slovak. The Slovak migrants used a language spoken in Slovakia when Slovaks were forced to settle the Junjan islands. Over the years, the Junjan Slovaks' language has been enriched by so many Russian, Junjan, and Inkirunnuit expressions that my dear reader would find exact transcription of our characters' dialogue hard to understand (Pišťanek 2008, 66).

When the novel was published in English translation by a small academic press in London, the editor's introductory notes informed the reader that while the original text switches between Czech and Slovak, "The translator and editor have decided to render the difference (the two languages differ little more than Edinburgh Scots from London English) not by writing different forms of English […] but by printing what was originally written in Czech in the more imperial Garamond typeface." The additional background information provided (explicitly for a "British reader") also alludes to the Scottish context: "The novel is set in the mid-1990s, when Czechoslovakia has split into two states, and Slovakia seems an anything-goes playground for mafias and corrupt politicians, while the Czech state [is] now a Kingdom […] The fictional Junjan Archipelago lies beyond the Arctic Circle of the Russian mainland and, in shape, seems very like the Shetland Islands, magnified by ten and rotated 90 degrees" (Pišťanek 2008, 5-6). At the end of the novel, Freddy leads the Junjun Slovaks to victory over their oppressors and after declaring himself Emperor Telgarth I, not only rejects the Czech kingdom's offer of unification, but leads the new Slovak Empire into the EU. After arranging for his parliament to elect Rácz as Prime Minister of the Slovak Empire, Telgarth not only expels all Czechs from the Slovak archipelago but in a final national revenge, blocks their application for EU membership.

Unlike Pišťanek's fiction, which received critical attention from leading Slovak scholars from its first appearance, Alexander Boldizar's first novel remains relatively unknown to both Canadian and Slovak readers, although the Slovak-American blogger Sarah Hinlicky Wilson has described it as "the best, most colorful, and most accurate depiction of what cultural confusion feels like that I have ever read" (Wilson 2018). In contrast to Pišťanek, however, who spent most of his life on Bratislava's outskirts near

the Austrian-Slovak border, Boldizar had an astonishing range of experiences that are partially reflected in his fiction. According to the author's Wikipedia page, mainly based on his website, Boldizar was born in Slovakia, escaped via Yugoslavia and Austria in 1979, and emigrated with his family to Canada. After his studies at Harvard Law School, he worked in such places as Japan, Indonesia, and the Canadian Arctic.

The prologue begins with a traditional boulder-throwing competition between Muzhduk, the son of the chieftain, and his opponent Hulagu, which Muzhduk wins: "Everyone cheered and came to congratulate Muzhduk for holding onto his title. He had gained another year to find and climb a mountain higher than the one climbed by his father or by any Slovak chief before him" (Boldizar 2016, 14). The village has one outsider, a Red Army paratrooper named Fred who has been held captive for years: "Fred knew more languages than the Uglis, who read every book they could steal, and he told Muzhduk wonderful stories about the world beyond Verkhoyansk: America, Africa, Europe, and other odd places" (Boldizar 2016, 17). Soon afterwards, a helicopter lands bringing a group of American anthropologists, whom Muzhduk immediately distrusts: "Fred the Political Officer had told him about the evil wizards of technology and the alienated factors of production and consumption, about the cities that scraped the clouds. And his father had met Americans in Afghanistan. He said they all sold shoulder-fired missiles" (Boldizar 2016, 19). One of the Americans informs Muzhduk (who speaks English) that Communism has fallen and that he has purchased their land from the Russian government: "You have a very rare breed of butterfly that lives only here. I want to set up a conservation area and fly in wealthy tourists" (Boldizar 2016, 20). To the horror of the anthropologists, Muzhduk informs them that the tribe eats the butterfly as a delicacy.

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On the helicopter ride back to the village, Muzhduk informs the Americans about his tribe's history, which bears some similarity to Pišťanek's account of the Junjuns (although I have not seen any reference by Boldizar to his direct influence):

> The Americans had read about the Czechoslovak Legion of 50,000 men who broke through Russian lines during World I and refused to turn back […] Muzhduk explained that while most of the Legion had continued east, his great-grandfather Muzhduk the Ugli the First had stopped here […] General Stefanik, the leader of the Czechoslovak Legion, insisted that the world was round, and that eventually they would come back to their beloved Tatra Mountains [….] Muzhduk's great-grandfather and six thousand men said no. The Verkhoyansk Mountains were similar enough to the Tatras, their feet were tired, they no longer remembered their wives. The six thousand stayed while the rest marched on. The Reds defeated the Whites, but many years passed before they turned to face their Slovak problem. […] In the end, the Red Army finally solved its Slovak problem by printing maps that didn't show the valley. And so, everyone lived in peace (Boldizar 2016, 20-22).

At the village, one of the Americans, John, explains that he is the attorney for SiberTours, adding: "I graduated with a Juris Doctor from Harvard Law School, first in my class, and I'm a member of the New York Bar." He is surprised when Muzhduk's father explains that they do not have laws, since their culture is based on honor, including the boulder-throwing tradition: "Words are toys. You can't throw words." John objects: "Of course you can. That is exactly what law school teaches. How to throw words." He asks the leader of the Ugli tribe for a symbolic gift, a small piece of land "the size of a bearskin." Finding it an absurdly small request, the chieftain puts his signature to the agreement, but two weeks later John returns and informs him that his company is indeed the owner of the Ugli tribe's land: "I cut [the bearskin] into a fine thread. I took the thread and placed it in a big circle that surrounds the six villages. Now this area is all mine." Temporarily

defeated, Muzhuk's father sends him into the world: "Go to that place where John the Attorney learned to throw words. To fight Reds, we had to understand metal. To fight Americans, we need words. Pick up the word *Harvard* and learn it better than John and bring it back" (Boldizar 2016, 24-27).

The rest of the novel is split into parallel narratives, that of Muzhduk's study at Harvard Law School, which he reaches on foot via Alaska and Canada, and his later travels through Mali in search of Peggy Roundtree, a fellow law student who has gone to Africa to join the Tuareg rebellion. The Harvard storyline is narrated in the third person, while the African one is told in the first person. When Muzhduk eventually finds Peggy, she tells him of her admiration for the Tuaregs: "They are some of the greatest fighters in history. For a thousand years they fought off the Hausa farmers from the south and Arabic and French armies from the north. This is about the only place I can think of in recent history where the nomads beat the sedentarists." Muzhduk compares them to Attila the Hun, adding a bit of pseudo-etymology parodying the Slovak historical resentment toward Hungarians: "You know the Hungarian word for 'door' is ajto? In Slovak, ajto means 'even that.' When the Huns first arrived and raided Slovak villages, they stole everything, even the doors, because they'd never seen one before. The Slovaks were surprised and asked, 'even that?' And so 'even that' became the Hungarian word for door" (Boldizar 2016, 255-56). When he eventually reaches Timbuktu, the tourist office reminds him of Russian schools in Siberia: "Before flying into Niamey, I'd expected Africa to be free of all the bureaucracy that gripped America. I'd expected it to be more than Verkhoyansk. But Verkhoyansk Slovaks had never been defeated. They'd never been colonized, categorized, made dependent on foreign aid, and taught that bureaucracy was a sign of

civilization" (Boldizar 2016, 293). The novel finally returns to Verkhoyansk in the brief epilogue, when Muzhduk takes Peggy back to live with his tribe, and when they ask why he traveled both to Harvard and to Africa, he informs them: "Just as there are two parts to becoming chief, there are two sides to every word" (Boldizar 2016, 363-64).

While he does not engage with post-1989 Central European society as deeply as Pišťanek does, Boldizar's hero Muzhduk the Ugli sees "Slovak" Siberia as a counterpart to his experiences at Harvard Law School and in Africa. Pišťanek's and Boldizar's works metaphorically portray the political and psychological traumas of the post-Communist era through the concepts of exile and tribalism, by repositioning the usually marginalized Slovak Republic as a center in relation to post-Soviet and postcolonial peripheries.

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**Response to Charles Sabatos:
"Reimagining Political Peripheries in
Pišťanek's and Boldizar's Siberian Slovakia"**

In his paper, Charles Sabatos gave a highly interesting insight into two of the most important novels in the field of Slovakian literature of the last three decades: *The Rivers of Babylon* (1991) by Peter Pišťanek (1960-2015) and *The Ugly* (2016) by the Canadian-Slovakian author Alexander Boldizar (*1971). These novels deal directly or indirectly through literary satire with the question of the relationship between the small country of Slovakia and its larger, more powerful neighbours, with the question of the postcolonial relationship between East and West and the underlying stereotypes of dominant and subordinate perspectives and power structures.

In different ways, both novels address the complicated question of Slovakian self-positioning in the space of semi-peripheral and postcolonial dynamics. The *Rivers of Babylon* is set in the underworld of Bratislava at the time of the political change in 1989, a world of crooks, fences, prostitutes, informers and others who are out to make a quick buck in the period before and after the fall of communism. The characters all strive for a better life, each in their own way, which they realise through strategies of deception and destruction. The novel was very entertaining due to its playful mixture of different genres and was one of the most discussed novels in Slovak literature. However, the subsequent parts of Rivers of Babylon, the novels *Drevená dedina* (1994,

The Wooden Village) and *Fredyho koniec* (1999, *The End of Freddy*), did not achieve the same level of interest as the first part.

The absurd satire *The Ugly* tells the story of a Siberian tribe whose tribal homeland is stolen by an American lawyer who sends one of its members to Harvard Law School to defend his right to exist and his own habitat by appropriating the legal language. The novel was voted the best new release on *Goodreads* in September 2016 and named one of the best fiction books of 2016 by *Entropy Magazine*. A common underlying theme can be recognised in the works of both authors/novels:

On the one hand, Slovak society is struggling to reposition itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Slovakia attempting to redefine its role as part of Central Eastern Europe. In the field of tension of the long-standing asymmetrical relationship between centre and periphery, Slovakia appears as peripheral in two respects: on the one hand, as part of the East, which has been constructed as peripheral based on Western stereotyping; on the other hand, as one of the smallest countries within Central Eastern Europe, which occupies a marginal position in relation to its neighbours. The only way to break out of such stereotypical binary structures is ultimately through parody and satire – and this is the theme of both novels, one from the inside perspective of the author living in Slovakia, the other from the outside perspective of the author living in Canada. Slovakia and Slovakian literature share the fate of other so-called 'small' Eastern European countries and 'smaller literatures': they are not part of the central currents of international cultural and political attention and intellectual discourse.

And this brings us to one of the core themes contained as theoretical background in Charles Sabatos's interpretation of the two novels: On the question of the extent to which postcolonial discourse can be thought together with post-Soviet discourse in analysing cultural, epistemological, political dependencies and

inequalities, or in other words, the extent to which the methods of postcolonial analysis can be adapted to the post-Soviet situation without running the risk of creating producing new imbalances and subalternities in the perception and self-perception of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe – for example by using the category of the post-Soviet, post-socialist to construct the East as the eternal 'Other', even 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. (With regard to the term 'post-Soviet' as an analytical category, there are two opposing arguments: first, the term is analytically legitimised precisely because of the collective transformation experience of the countries loosely grouped around it. Secondly, it can be argued that 'post-Soviet' no longer merely describes a historical period, but has also become an ideological point of comparison that reproduces the binary relationship between the capitalist West and the socialist-communist East in the tradition of the 'Other').

As Charles Sabatos shows in detail in his paper, what Peter Pišťanek's and Alexander Boldizar's novels have in common (despite all the differences in their narrative styles and despite the difference in themes, content-related and temporal framework of the novels) is that they radically break with the post-Soviet or post-socialist situation in the mode of transformation in which they seem to set the plot. At the same time - and this is what makes them so intellectually exciting – they satirically undermine the established categories and entrenched perspectives of the 'late Soviet', 'post-Soviet', 'post-colonial', 'semi-peripheral', 'Western', 'Eastern': In Pišťanek's trilogy, the first part, *The Rivers of Babylon*, refers to Bratislava as a Central European metropolis in the intellectual 'European periphery', rich in linguistic diversity, social and cultural stratification and the pop music of the late 1980s in the former socialist world. However, the political transformation from late socialism to early capitalism barely touches this world, as it is not a struggle but a "grotesque fusion of the two antagonistic systems", as the literary scholar Pokrivčáková (2002) puts it.

The second and third parts of the trilogy, *Drevená dedina* (1994, *The Wooden Village*) and *Fredyho koniec* (1999, *The End of Freddy*), seem not only to parody debates about national identity or the cultural self-reflection of a small nation in a post-Soviet discourse by relocating an imaginary community of Slovaks far away into the (post-Soviet/post-communist) Arctic.

The novels also parody the nostalgic notion of a stable or homogenous culture and literature by shifting the focus from the unequal relationship between Czech and Slovak nationalism to the international level of global inequality in a turbo-capitalist world. As Peter Petro, the translator of the novels into English, pointed out in his analysis of the book, "it also throws light on the uncritical embrace of the Western pseudo-culture (represented by the porno industry), which found the post-communist countries that turned against all kinds of censorship an easy prey with willing collaborators" (2003).

Alexander Boldizar's novel *The Ugly* (2016) (translated into Czech by Jota Press as *Ošklivec*), as Charles rightly argues, can be read as an indirect dialogue with or as a response to 'The Rivers of Babylon'. For even though it was written in English by an author who does not live in Slovakia at all, but in Canada, and though it is set in the imaginary people of the Slovaks in Siberia, it also shows the ideological, cultural-capitalist extremes of postcolonial dynamics in relation to an East that is still exoticized. And it also shows that (national, cultural) self-assertion against the geopolitical power dominants of this world produces blossoms that are just as beautiful as they are ultimately hopeless. The novel reflects in a very humoristic way its author's background in the literary periphery of Europe through its parodic self-representation of imagined Siberian Slovaks. It plays with both Western stereotypes about Eastern Europe and Slovak narratives of self-definition in the context of the political and psychological traumas of the post-communist era and also within globalised capitalism, by locating

the usually marginalised (albeit geographically Central European) Slovak Republic as a new (imagined) centre in relation to the post-Soviet and post-colonial peripheries.

Alexander Boldizar's novel *The Ugly* (2016), as Charles rightly argues, can be read as an indirect dialogue with or as a response to *The Rivers of Babylon's* double periphery. The novel was written in English by an author who does not live in Slovakia but in Canada. He also has set the plot of his novel in the imaginary people of the Slovaks in Siberia and he also shows with humor and parody the ideological, cultural-capitalist extremes of postcolonial dynamics in relation to an East that is still exoticized. And it also shows that (national, cultural) self-assertion against the geopolitical power dominants of this world produces blossoms that are just as beautiful as they are ultimately hopeless. The novel reflects in a very humoristic way the Slovak literature and culture in the literary periphery of Europe through its parodic self-representation of imagined Siberian Slovaks. It plays with both Western stereotypes about Eastern Europe and Slovak narratives of self-definition in the context of the political and psychological traumas of the post-communist era and also within globalised capitalism, by locating the usually marginalised (albeit geographically Central European) Slovak Republic as a new (imagined) centre in relation to the post-Soviet and post-colonial peripheries. I would like to raise two questions for discussion:

1. The first point refers to the asymmetries of simultaneity of postcolonial and post-Soviet discourses that both authors highlight in their novels by simply reversing the relations between centre and periphery and relocating the negotiations of Slovakian identity and community to the 'edge of the world', to former Soviet Siberia. Can we not also speak of a certain nostalgia here, in the sense that the imagination of a Slovak identity that has not (yet) been corrupted by the Western world has been deliberately relocated to the outermost periphery of the Western world in order to archive it? Could this be a persiflage of a nostalgic attitude towards the western and

global capitalistic world that, despite all the criticism inherent in the parodic approach of the novel, seeks to avoid liberation from the eternal reproduction of binary categorizations of East-West, post-Soviet/communist, colonial-anti-colonial?

2. What role does the topos of self-exoticization play in both novels in relation to the dynamics of popular culture, which is present both as a literary intertextual method and as an object of reflection? Both books play offensively and provocatively with a certain image of the East as the exotic Other. Is it possibly also about fulfilling expectations that are part of popular culture and the literary market defined as Western? Or could one instead speak of a re-appropriation of both Western and Eastern popular culture in literary discourse, with the aim of pursuing a very specific form of decolonization?

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Multilingual Minority:

Poetical Decomposition of the Embodied Dictatorial Legacy

Transborder Hungarian Literature and Multilingual Minority Self-awareness

East-Central Europe as "the mother of all historical regions" ("Mutter aller Geschichtsregionen", Troebst 2010) and a historical in-between territory, where dislocating maps have for centuries continuously re-framed static spaces and their inhabitants, merges traces of different national and ethnic memories. On a smaller scale in East-Central Europe one example could be the transborder/minority Hungarian literature as an inherently multilingual phenomenon, which came to denote works produced in the Hungarian language within the territories of Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia (the former Czechoslovakia, USSR, and Yugoslavia respectively), where significant Hungarian minority populations exist as a result of the post-WWI redrawing of the region's borders. This conceptual categorisation could be seen as an example of what Brubaker calls "the movement of borders over people" (Brubaker 2015, 136). The inherent linguistic otherness, i.e. the coexistence of these literatures with other, surrounding languages dislocates both the traditional descriptive categories with which the contemporary Hungarian literary history operates, and the viability of a literary canon based on the borders of the nation state. Consequently,

could re-frame and deconstruct the national as a homogeneous entity, since the conceptualization of the transborder/minority Hungarian literature as multilingual could undermine the "sacrosanct monopoly of methodological nationalism in literary studies" (Tihanov 2017, 475) based on monolingualism.[1]

In this essay, I argue that due to cultural interferences, the hybridity of East-Central Europe as a shared territory between different national and ethnic groups could be seen as a common non-nationalistic context, and I chart two kinds of phenomena for "multilingual locals" (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018), which deconstruct national literary hierarchies. Examining the ways in which Romanian and Hungarian texts interact with one another regarding the representation of the 1989 regime change, I suggest that literary texts are created as inherently multilingual and that Hungarian novels can be seen as mediums of multilingual cultural memory. By drawing on Hungarian and Romanian novels related to the historical events of 1989, I explore "located perspectives" (ibid, 6) on a common historical past and claim that all these works can be understood as a decomposition and transformation of the Communist ideological conditioning, and as a search for self-expression through language. I consider Hungarian literature as a medium of multilingual cultural

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[1] See, for example, Ádám Bodor's novels, the works of a Transylvanian-born author, as mediums of multilingual regional memory. His novels are examples of "commuting grammars," the texts written with a "multilingual self-awareness" (Thomka 2018, 146, 34–35) that transmit and translate the multilingual experience and polyphonic cultural memory of East-Central Europe. They create localized perspectives by juxtaposing (conflicting) historical mnemonic legacies and differences, and by remediating them, as audible vernacular memory, into a dispersed, accented contemporary reading experience. His Hungarian oeuvre evokes the memory of a multi-ethnic community in the past and preserves a continuous oscillation between the inscribed memory of other languages (for example Armenian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Ruthenian, Transylvanian Saxon, Zipser German, Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish), which is translated by the text into a dispersed, Hungarian linguistic and poetic experience. Bodor's oeuvre is part of Transylvanian and Hungarian literary canon, and simultaneously of the Romanian Literature as World Literature. See Balázs 2017, 157-174.

memories, which restructure Hungarian cultural perception in a way that leads to the Hungarian language simultaneously oscillating between accents.

Analysing in detail one chapter of the Andrea Tompa's novel, I propose the concept of multilingual minority when a political and societal disadvantage is reshaped as a poetical, artistic opportunity, namely a Hungarian minority experience in Romanian society turns into a transnational multilingual self-awareness in artistic processes.

Reshaping the National Categorizations – Interconnected *Bildung* Narratives of 1989 in Romania

In the context of newly flourishing nationalistic and ethnocentric ideologies and mutual exclusive nationalisms, as seen in post-1989 East-Central Europe, Romanian-born American scholar Marcel Corniș-Pope stresses that "focusing on 'cultural contacts' is even more important today than during the Cold War period: literary history must venture into new areas, acting as a corrective both to narrow ethnocentric treatments of culture, but also to the counter-theories of globalism that erase distinctions between individual cultures" (Corniș-Pope 2016, 28).

The 1989 regime change in Eastern Europe could be perceived as a series of events on the 'periphery' (viewed from Western Europe) which had an effect on the 'centre'. For a short time, these events were in the focus of the global and uneven world.[2] At the same time, the historical event bridges the national (small language) boundaries: novels written in Hungarian and in Romanian come across as "contact

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[2] For a detailed analysis of the 'combined and uneven world-system' regarding world-literature, see Warwick Research Collective 2015.

narratives" (Kaakinen 2017, 23) through intersecting personal formations and viewpoints, and they jointly create the common and shared past as the Romanian locality. In this sense, they enable another conceptualization of literature, one that questions the evidence of "the nation as a self-contained unit for literary production" (Domínguez, Neumann 2018, 209).

My broader comparative corpus for this purpose is: Dumitru Ţepeneag: *Hotel Europa* (1996; *Hotel Europa*, translated by Patrick Camiller, 2010); Andrea Tompa: *A hóhér háza* (2010, rev. ed. 2015; *The Hangman's House*, translated by Bernard Adams, 2021); Bogdan Suceavă: *Noaptea când cineva a murit pentru tine* (2010, The Night when Somebody Died for You); Zsigmond Sándor Pap: *Semmi kis életek* (2011, Insignificant Lives); Zsolt Láng: *Bestiarium Transylvaniae. A föld állatai* (2011, Bestiarium Transylvaniae: The Animals of Earth); György Dragomán: *Máglya* (2014; *The Bone Fire*, translated by Ottilie Mulzet, 2020); Radu Pavel Gheo: *Disco Titanic* (2016); Gábor Vida: *Egy dadogás története* (2017; *Story of a Stammer*, translated by Jozefina Komporaly, 2022); Farkas Király: *Sortűz* (2018, Barrage).

Reading side by side these contemporary Romanian and Hungarian novels which deal with the events of 1989, their *common locality* becomes evident; the experience of the totalitarian regime and the fall of the regime as a common ground "forge a sense of locality" (Domínguez, Neumann 2018, 209). They map fragments of the common past shared in different languages. Reading these novels alongside one another, another aspect becomes obvious: not only the Hungarian novels but also those written in Romanian are created as multilingual worlds.

Radu Pavel Gheo's *Disco Titanic* (2016) is located in the multi-ethnic city of Timişoara (Temesvár in Hungarian, Temeswar in German); Bogdan Suceavă's *The Night when Somebody Died for You* (2010) focuses on mandatory military service in

the Communist era. For young people the army service was also a site for contact with other ethnicities living within the country and with other Romanians from different parts of the country speaking different dialects. (The novels of Farkas Király and Gábor Vida are also at least partly set during the era of mandatory military service).

Multilingualism as "the coexistence of different belief systems and forms of knowledge" (Doloughan 2009, 40) is developed on many levels in Tepeneag's novel. Through metaleptic poetics, *Hotel Europa* (1996) combines and interweaves the postmodern auto-poetic self-reflective narrative style with the conditions of realism of an Eastern-European post-1989 vagabond-journey in Western Europe. A very unique aspect of this novel reconfigures multilingualism from a 'class' perspective, seeing that all the gangsters and prostitutes of the Eastern European underworld that follow the young adult character as a network are multilingual, they speak several languages with post-Soviet accents.[3]

The historical events of 1989 in Romania and their formative role in the young female and male narrators' or characters' personal/individual formation link these novels to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, giving it a new function. In Mikhail Bakhtin's definition, it is a genre of "mastering historical time" and of framing "the new sphere of historical existence", thus it is also a genre which "compromises among distinct worldviews" (Moretti 2000, vii and xii). If we read these novels within the narrative frameworks of the *Bildungsroman*, the role of the (historical) event in the processes of personal formation becomes visible; however, the result is not a narrative form typical of the *Bildungsroman*. The events of 1989 play the role of a liminal event in the characters' bildung process on a personal, though not on a social level. The plots are

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[3] For a detailed analysis of the novel, see Dánél 2023, 85-113.

either placed in the midst of the events happening on the streets (see Bogdan Suceavă's and Farkas Király's novels), or more often the events are contextualized in a broader period before and after 1989 (see the other novels). This second aspect reveals the overlapping character of the novels; the event can be seen as the border between periods and also as a connecting point between before and after. This interwoven aspect of the historical event in process also reflects the 'face' of the event. Namely, the event becomes visible from the perspectives of different personal life stories. These novels re-create the 'nature' of the event as a multiplication and intersection of several personal and power viewpoints. These novels are created as a site for a cross-section of viewpoints, where the narrator(s) are navigating like a handheld camera capturing non-linear, fragmented occurrences, memories, personal shards, and reflections. The historical event narrated as a personal, even subjective event, links the language of literature with the event that occurred, without objectifying language (which was a characteristic of social-realist literary modes). The generational correlation (with the exception of Tepeneag, every writer was born in Romania around the seventies) could be interpreted as an exploration of language for an appropriate, authentic literary language connected to history and society.

The *Bildungsroman's* master narrative is re-invented as a liminal genre between art and the historical event. On the personal level of the characters, these novels create 1989 as a landmark event in their personal developmental process. Indoctrinations, memories of socialism are implemented in non-linear, self-reflexive narratives as shards, realisms in narratives of private memory. In Andrea Tompa's, György Dragomán's and Zsolt Láng's novels, the main viewpoint is embodied by a young girl. An interesting aspect becomes visible when we compare the young female characters' actions with the young male soldiers' viewpoints in Bogdan Suceavă's and

Farkas Király's novels: namely, the girls appear as free agents in the streets in the midst of the events, moreover, they can even be portrayed the rebellious hero (as in Dragoman's novel). They try to influence and shape the evolution of the event personally. The historical event, being incorporated through the female agents, also balances the conception of history as a male event. Compared to the girls' perspective, the male soldiers' viewpoints are more insecure, fragmented and ultimately disappointed. In both Király's and Suceavă's novels the chaotic event accidentally 'traps' innocent victims, close to the narrators' friends. This similarity in Hungarian and Romanian novels also reveals the common collective male traumas which the soldiers suffered in the middle of the events. (In Radu Pavel Gheo's novel, the young male character is also wounded).

What all these novels have in common is how they describe pre-1989 childhoods and pre-1989 conditions distinctly but definitely as a common institutionalisation of personal lives. The narratives can be seen as a countermeasure, an image breaker of visual and other practices of deep communist indoctrination even at the bodily level. These novels can be understood 'as a decomposition and transformation of the Communist (state-socialist) ideological conditionings and inscribed fantasies, and as a search for self-expression through language'.

Indoctrination, Embodied Dictatorship, and Poetical Decomposition

In this sense the most powerful example is Andrea Tompa's first novel *The Hangman's House* (first Hungarian edition 2010, revised edition 2015), which is at the same time a poetic example of the inner heterogeneity of the Hungarian literary language.

In its 38 chapters, every chapter is one single, gigantic, and fluid sentence, saturated by Romanian, English, Hebrew, German words, and sentences. The genre of the *Bildungsroman* is de- and recomposed as a texture of passage where different linguistic and cultural layers, political and ideological structures are intermingled and transposed, and in which one young girl attempts to pass into the new future. In the novel, the events of 1989 play an essential role; the novel is framed by two chapters, which are related to the events of 1989 in Cluj and Timişoara. For the young female protagonist, time with a future aspect – essential for the *Bildung* process – begins with the historical events of 1989. The internal chapters are characterised by "liquid, boundless time" (Andrea Tompa) without the sense of mobility and future. The chapter-long sentences can themselves be considered as provocative rebellious poetic performances against the dictatorial regime with its closed, bounded space and time, which, at the same time, can be understood as a form of structural violence on Hungarian grammar. The novel's world is a multilingual space in which the characters' identities are negotiated through inter-lingual and intermedial encounters.

The chapter "The Mouth" recalls and re-enacts the propaganda tradition when the Romanian dictator's face was put together as a gigantic puzzle picture formed by children. In the following passage, there are two (or more) cases of ekphrasis of the pictures or the moving "gigantic face" of the "One-ear". This is the way the invisible dictator is called in 'his' multiple, remediated images in the novel.[4] For a more intense experiencing of the flow and the poetics of the chapter-long sentences and the dynamic of the girl's self-understanding process I cite a longer quote here:

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[4] Official photographs of Nicolae Ceauşescu showed him only in profile.

"*What part of him are you?* asked Csabi Ürögdi, blue with cold outside the children's clinic at the 25 trolleybus stop, because they would go the same way to the Györgyfalvi district, but no trolley had come in half an hour … *I don't know*, the Girl answered uncertainly, watching for the buses on Monostori út, but there was nothing coming, then glancing doubtfully at little Csabi, *Aren't we letters?*, … *What colour were you wearing?* asked Csabi, because in the stadium they'd not been together … (the senior pupils also were said to bring in *pálinka* and tea with rum in it) – led them up into the stand on the south side, where they had to turn on the shout of *'La dreapta!'* (Right turn!); … the pig-eyed history teacher Ghiţă stood down below on the edge of the pitch on the top level of a podium fished out of the store, marked with a 1 and intended for winners, and howled into an aluminium megaphone, trying as he did so to turn over folded diagrams in the icy wind that blew from the side, and the teachers in charge of the classes and groups at the ends repeated the words of command: this was the sign that they had to turn all together in four stages, and those in charge clapped their hands eight times: left foot outwards turn, right foot beside it (so far a half-turn), left foot outwards turn, again right foot beside it, and by now they were facing the other way), only all this had to be done on a fixed, plastic seat on which there was hardly room for their boots, it was next to impossible to turn, so somebody was always falling off or late because the seats were wet and slippery, those that were badly secured wobbled, somebody must have taken the screws out – *One side's blue, the other side's red*, she replied, and thought that it might be as well to start walking home, there must be a power cut because nothing was coming up the hill, although several people were waiting, but perhaps they were queueing for the shop behind the bus stop? – *Red? There's no red*, said Csabi firmly, and added *I've got black and white: white is the letter on one side, black is his hair on the other*, and he began to blow on his red hands, *Aren't we letters on both sides? That's what Year Ten told me*, asked the Girl, because no one had officially told them what they were portraying, all that they knew was that they were preparing for a celebration, and it was a great honour and distinction for the whole school that they had been chosen, and so the Girl hadn't thought about what the colours meant, she'd just been waiting every day to go home – *Shall we go?* she suggested, because she and Csabi often walked home. – *Yes, let's, there's nothing coming. At one time we're white letters on blue, then the other side's the picture. Which side are you on most?* he asked – *You mean, facing the stadium? The blue. Where are you going?* she asked, because in the meantime she'd decided to go to Grandmother's instead, where there was always some lunch left over, and now she might get a hot milky coffee as well, but Mother wouldn't be home until evening, she'd said she was working out of town – *I don't know, don't mind, I'm not going home* – replied Csabi, *I'm with the white more, I'm the hat on the letter ă, you know, right at the very top, because the side of the stand's been extended to make room for the whole thing, the words and the picture, they say the other stadium was higher than the Kolozsvár one, they've welded bars onto the top railings* – they just hung about for two days while that was done, couldn't even go into the dressing rooms – *then the bars have been supported from*

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underneath, little planks put over them, and we stand on those, there's only a rope behind us, and the shortest and lightest in the whole school have been chosen, there are some fourth formers as well, they haven't put anybody smaller up there because a stupid third former fell off, and the whole thing wobbles like this when we get up and turn – Csabi demonstrated with his red hands – *everybody shakes, and they've put the smallest up there in case the whole thing collapses under the big ones, you see, we're very high up, makes you shit yourself, you can see the cross in Főtér, the whole of Fellegvár, the Kerekdomb and the station, the Szamos bridge as well, Donát út, the Kányafő, the Monostor, the cemetery, the covered-up lions on the Roman theatre, I'd never seen the town from so high up, and you can't hear what Ghiţă's shouting down there either* – because it was he, the history teacher, who was directing the proceedings from down there – *we've got Kriszti on the end of the row, he's really shit scared, feels sick all the time, so I'm the very highest of the letters, on the first ă in 'Trăiască' (Long live), and when we turn I'm his hair, see! when I've got my back turned and I look down I shit myself! and when we turn round there's the picture, then your back's black or white, you're hair, face, eye, but there's no other colour, I've not heard of any red, d'you want one?* And he took out a pack of Albanian Apollonias and offered it, and now they were passing the Ethnographic Museum in Unió utca, and Csabi's mother knew that he smoked and only laughed – *Are you daft? Here in the street? Here and now?* because before the holiday there were more police about, but you had to look out for adults as well, they might note your identity number, … *How many reds do you think there were? How many piles when you gave them in?* Csabi asked suddenly, as if he'd just remembered that at the end of the practice the overalls were stacked in piles of ten, and he stubbed out the cigarette on the wall of a house because his hand was frozen by then, and put the long butt back in the box. *Look, I'm going to have to go to my mother's office, see you*, said the Girl, and turned abruptly on her heel, but she didn't make for her mother's office but, although it was out of the way, for her grandparents', because it has suddenly dawned on her that she could only be his mouth: the fleshy lips, drawn into a smile on the front pages of textbooks, the blood-red cherry lips on the classroom wall above the double poster, the smiling lips on the holiday front page of the newspapers – his teeth never showed in the smile – the mouth that ranted long speeches on the television, she was the mouth in the gigantic picture made up of another school's worth of children, which in birthday greeting would turn into a sudden, smiling portrait on the south side of the stadium, the mouth which would churn out catch-phrases and cheer itself when the tiny original of the picture descended from the helicopter at the birthday celebrations in the middle of the gravel-strewn, red-carpeted stadium, and a chosen boy and girl would run forward and happily greet him – the best class in the school – and school governors had come in Pioneer uniform on the first days and practised in the dressing room – with flowers, salt and a huge, gleaming plaited sweetbread that no mouth would touch, step onto the edge of the rolled-out carpet, like the little ones, the Falcons of the Fatherland, in just blouses and skirts, and a bigger pupil would declaim enthusiastically into the microphone

the poem entitled *Ce-ţi doresc eu ţie, dulce Românie* – What do I wish you, sweet Romania – the rest would sing and, standing on the plastic seats of the stadium, would suddenly turn round on the word of command, and then the picture would appear … *Now I'm his disgusting mouth*, had suddenly came into her head, and she felt sick as she thought of herself and the overalls that she'd not long taken off, she felt as if cold, drooling lips were kissing her defenceless body, as if this huge frothing mouth were vomiting white, foaming letters over her, and she was becoming a bit of living, loathsome, pink flesh, torn off and displayed to public view, because *I am him, or vice versa, he is me*: I am his flesh, inseparably conjoined, he's taking root in me so that I shan't be able to wash him off, and his likeness has been burned into me like a brand, I am him, or more precisely we are all him, because we're all stood in nice, tidy order and we turn on the word of command and we're him: but he himself doesn't exist anywhere, nobody ever sees him, never: Tátá's seen him and my uncle Pista as well, they've sat with him at meetings, but now he's just pictures, pictures, pictures, not a person, just pictures, something that we've jointly made up and unknowingly formed from our bodies … *I'm his mouth, I've got to stand still, like a statue, the lips will move with me, open and swallow me, or open to speak and speak through me, his words will start to pour forth because there are no others, only his screeching voice, because it is I, I, I in my blood-red overalls that keep him alive* ... (Tompa 2021, 22-29, italics in original).

The description intertwines the tangible, traumatic and sensual inner perspective of the child with the panoptic, downward-looking view (through which ironically the dictator looks as "the tiny original of the picture", composed for him). This process of puzzle-making objectifies the children's bodies that it uses to create its picture. In the chapter-length sentences, Hungarian and Romanian words and sentences are also intertwined: they depict a multilingual city and co-existence from the inner viewpoint of the Hungarian girl.

On the one hand, the Romanian language functions as a medium of power, as an instrumentalised language of propaganda, of command, and of dehumanization, as seen, for example, in the command "La dreapta! (Right turn!)". The Romanian national poem of Mihai Eminescu "Ce-ţi doresc eu ţie, dulce Românie (What do I wish you, sweet Romania)" also appears as an instrumentalised element in a propaganda

show. In addition, Csabi, the Hungarian boy is objectified in the big propaganda picture as a specific Romanian diacritic, "the hat on the letter ă" he is "the very highest [tallest] of the letters, on the first ă in 'Trăiască' (Long live)". Meanwhile, the Romanian equivalent of the word 'father' appears in the text – referring to the girl's own father – but written with Hungarian diacritics: "Tátá". This Romanian-Hungarian denomination cannot be reduced, transcribed, or translated either to the Hungarian 'apa' or to Romanian 'tată', the latter word being expropriated in the Communist era by propaganda language which called the dictator the father of all Romanian children.5

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5 For this connotation see a fragment form Herta Müller's book *Der Mensch ist ein großer Fasan auf der Welt* which stages propagandistic indoctrination in Romania. By repeating such basic sentences, the instrumentalized language appears as a medium of the ideological conditioning of children. And the diabolical efficiency consists in blending the images of the family and the country. The extension of the private images (house, family, parents) to the non-private (country, leaders) results in the suspension of the private as private. See: "Amalie hängt die Landkarte Rumäniens an die Wand. 'Alle kinder wohnen in Wohnblocks oder in Häusern', sagt Amalie. 'Jedes Haus hat Zimmer. Alle Häuser bilden zusammen ein grosse Haus ist unser Land. Unser Vaterland.' Amalie zeigt auf die Landkarte. 'Das ist unser Vaterland', sagt sie. Sucht mit der Fingerspitze die schwarzen Punkte auf der Karte. 'Das sind die Städte sind die Zimmer dieses grossen Hauses, unseres Landes. In unserem Häusern wohnen unser Vater und unsere Mutter. Sie sind unsere Eltern. Jedes Kind hat seine Eleter. So wie unser Vater im Haus, in dem wir wohnen, der Vater is, ist Genosse Nicolae Ceauşescu der Vater unseres Landes. Und so wie unsere Mutter im Haus, in dem wohnen, unsere Mutter is, ist Genossin Elena Ceauşescu die Mutter unseres Landes. Genosse Nicolae Ceauşescu is der Vater aller Kinder. Und Genossin Elena Ceauşescu ist die Mutter aller Kinder. Alle Kinder lieben den Genossen und die Genossin, weil sie ihre Eltern sind.'" (1986, 61-62). English translation: "Amalie hangs the map of Romania on the wall. 'All children live in the blocks of flats or in houses,' says Amalie. 'Every house has rooms. All the houses together make one big house. This big house is our contry. Our fatherland.' Amalie points at the map. 'This is our Fatherland,' she says. With her fingertip she searches for the black dots on the map. 'These are the towns of our Fatherland,' says Amalie. 'The towns are the rooms of this big house, our country. Our fathers and mothers live in our houses. They are our parents. Every child has its parents. Just as the father in the house in which we live is our father, so Comrade Nicolae Ceauşescu is the father of our country. And just the mother in the house in which we live is our mother, so Comrade Elena Ceauşescu is the mother of our country. Comrade Nicolae Ceauşescu is the father of all the children. And Comrade Elena Ceauşescu is the mother of all the children. All the children love Comrade Nicolae and Comrade Elena, because they are their parents'" (2015, 59-60).

In this cultural and intertextual context, through the interaction of the Hungarian and Romanian stresses and diacritics the word 'Tátá' in Tompa's novel looks like a re-familiarisation of the Romanian word 'tată' in the personal relationship between the Hungarian daughter and her father. The way the word sounds lays claims simultaneously to two languages: Spelt like this, it also signals the interaction of the Hungarian and Romanian diacritics and accents: the long Hungarian 'á' in the Romanian word conjures up the long-accented Romanian 'a'. The inner disruption and split sound of the word 'Tátá' also performs and mediates the disruption (or dissensus) between the written and the pronounced word. (The simultaneity of the disruption and interaction of the two written-verbally uttered languages create a space for an intimate reading for those who are connected to these languages, to Romanian-Hungarian interacted accents.)

The inter-lingual character of the novel as a "destabilization of fixed, monolithic viewpoints" (Sabo 2014, 106) is connected to other disruptions. Such a disruption can be found between the institutionalized, regulated body and the sensitive body. By keeping orders turning left and right, the trained body "acts and pushes" the protagonist for long period in self-accusation when she faces her father's death, who is probably not dead yet, but she turns out without calling the ambulance. After this tragic turn, she heads off, running in a ritualistic fashion in order to find or get back her own body. The body instructed to turn left and right, becomes a site for expressing personal guilt, while the turning itself emerges as a language/body of self-discovery. Meanwhile, the trope of running laps aids the transformation and reclamation/re-appropriation of the previously over-regulated body.

Another important example for transformation and re-functionalization of an inscribed attitude and body condition could be detected in re-appropriation of the

propagandistic performances: the big street marches and chants in praise of the dictator organised by communist propaganda turn into revolutionary chanting in December 1989. People now are chanting together with the power of the rhythmic memory of learned/inscribed slogans: "Down with communism! Jos communismul!"

In the novel's world we can detect the girl's *Bildung* as a struggle between elements of society as fake pictures, propaganda images and commands written even in bodily exercise. What the novel explores and suggests, not so much as a message, but as a method in my interpretation, is that the process of *Bildung* is actually a de-formation process, a self-alienation from the interiorized communist dictatorial conditions inscribed in the body. On the other hand, *The Hangman's House* gives intimate examples for such multilingual characters who – because of the nature of the shared discordant language – speak all languages with an accent, including their own mother tongue. Where the accent as a medium preserves the other language, the interaction of languages as audible present.

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Entrapment and Resistance. Language and Power in

Andrea Tompa's *The Hangman's House*

Response to Mónika Dánél:

"Multilingual Minority: Poetical Decomposition of the

Embodied Dictatorial Legacy"

The theme of 'entrapment' lies at the heart of Andrea Tompa's *The Hangman's House* (2010, rev. 2015, translated into English in 2021), but it also encapsulates a defining characteristic of the 'political novel' as a genre – that consistently interrogates the ideological, social, and linguistic forces that constrain both individuals and communities. In Tompa's text, the entrapment extends far beyond the political, emerging not only through oppressive political regimes but also through the constraints imposed by one's native tongue, and the broader cultural-linguistic frameworks that define and confine individual and collective existence. The exploration of the individual's relationship to language – whether native or state-mandated – serves as a central motif, where marginalized local languages and cultures intersect with dominant official languages, reflecting the individual's relationship with the collective and, ultimately, broader center-periphery dynamics.

For many Eastern and Central European writers, particularly those who lived under communist regimes, language becomes both a battleground and a site of negotiation: a space in which power is exercised, resisted, and reconfigured. This phenomenon is highlighted by Mónika Dánél, who discusses contemporary authors from East-Central Europe as those who 'commute grammar' navigating not only between languages but also across cultures, positioning themselves within multifaceted sociopolitical landscapes. Through the interweaving of language and political struggle, these writers engage in a complex and ongoing cultural negotiation, a theme that remains central to Tompa's novel. The issue of linguistic entrapment is especially pressing when considering how literary histories and canons are often constructed as integral components of national identity. In post-Soviet states, this canonization tends to center around linguistic homogeneity, with official languages gaining primacy while minority languages are relegated to the periphery or the private sphere. This tension between official language and cultural expression deepens the entrapment of individuals, illustrating how language can both shape and confine the political, cultural, and personal realms in profound and enduring ways. This situation is compounded by the persistent legacy of totalitarian regimes that sought not only to control the political and public sphere but also to mediate cultural expression through language. In *The Hangman's House*, one can trace the lingering presence of these power structures and how they haunt the characters, especially their relationships with language. This dynamic between individual and collective identity is brought into sharp focus, echoing the dynamics of "center over an enormous periphery" (Moretti 1998, 195), where the 'center,' is not just a geographical location but serves as a symbol of control. The periphery is the space outside this power center, where those who are not aligned with the dominant ideology live, both literally and metaphorically. This

center-periphery tension is very much palpable in Tompa's portrayal of characters navigating multilingual lives, seeking expression and identity. The concept of 'commuting grammar' becomes particularly relevant here, as Tompa's characters exist at a linguistic and cultural crossroads. In the chapter "Christmas 1989", for instance, a seemingly simple exchange of words – "*Eu răspund* (I'll deal with it), *Yes ma'am*, replied the boy, saluted smartly and ran back with the instruction … and Mummy repeated in Romanian and Hungarian" (Tompa 2021, 335; emphasis in original) – reveals the dissonance between the authoritative language and languages of familial intimacy, and is crucial to understanding the entrapment at play in *The Hangman's House*. This moment encapsulates the characters' yearning for a multilingual society that embraces diverse identities. Yet Tompa's portrayal of this fleeting aspiration reveals how, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, this possibility has remained, and continues to remain, largely unrealized. Both Hungary and Romania uphold monolingualism despite their multilingual populations, thus marginalizing minority language speakers and reflecting a continuity of centralizing power structures. The political entrapment inherent in the state's control of language extends beyond a mere political issue, penetrating deeply into the personal and cultural realms, where it shapes the identities of individuals caught between their yearning for linguistic freedom and the stark realities of political power. This dynamic is aesthetically rendered in the text through the concept of 'innocence' and 'identity'. In totalitarian regimes, innocence is redefined and reshaped by political forces, where the erasure of private and public divides transforms identity: it becomes enmeshed in the state's ideological apparatus. In the chapter "The Mouth", the question "*What part of him are you*?" (Tompa 2021, 22; emphasis in original) posed to a young girl among a group of children dressed to form a living version of a portrait of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, vividly

illustrates how the state subsumes individual identity into its collective image, "his gigantic face" (Tompa 2021, 28). The children's faces and bodies, once markers of singular selves, are transformed into mere components of a larger, dehumanizing apparatus. This transformation is underscored by the unsettling detail that "no one had officially told them what they were portraying … it was a great honour and distinction for the whole school that they had been chosen" (Tompa 2021, 24), highlighting the erasure of personal autonomy even in the act of representation. This phenomenon is further amplified in "Christmas 1989", where the intrusion of surveillance becomes a palpable force, with the removal of a bug from a telephone. The act of bugging private spaces is not merely a tool of control, but a manifestation of the state's ability to infiltrate the most intimate aspects of life, and the surveillance device itself symbolizes the breakdown of the boundary between public and private, as it encroaches upon the sanctuary of the home, violating the very spaces that should remain beyond the reach of the state's pervasive eye. The psychological repercussions of such surveillance are equally profound, manifesting in the characters' palpable fear of going "to bed because next day she might not wake up" (Tompa 2021, 339). This phrase encapsulates the ever-present anxiety and existential uncertainty that define existence under a totalitarian regime. In these moments, the characters are ensnared not only by the political system but also by a pervasive psychological entrapment, unable to escape the haunting fear of loss – loss of identity, autonomy, and, ultimately, life itself.

The Hangman's House exemplifies how the political novel functions not simply as a vehicle for depicting oppression, but as a dynamic site of deconstruction and transformation. As a genre, it probes the fluidity of power, identity, and meaning, exposing these concepts as unfixed and continually reshaped by the shifting forces of history, language, and politics. This relational nature of power underscores the genre's

capacity for profound social and political critique. In this light, Tompa's novel transcends mere representation of the breakdown between public and private spheres, instead engaging directly with the fluidity and volatility of these boundaries. Perhaps, as David Damrosch (2003, 281) suggested regarding World literature, the political novel might be seen "*not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading*" (emphasis in original). This approach invites readers to confront the unsettling experience of being 'detached' with the world (see 2003, 281), navigating the discomfort of texts informed by divergent historical, social, and linguistic realities. Through this lens, Tompa's work as a translingual text challenges readers to engage with the layered complexities of language and identity, revealing how the boundaries between public and private, personal and political, are perpetually shifting and never fully stable.

Ultimately, Tompa's novel offers a profound meditation on the individual's entrapment within the interwoven structures of political and linguistic power. By illuminating the intersections of personal and political confinement, the text reveals how identity and agency are shaped – and often constrained – by state ideologies and institutional forces. In this respect, the political novel serves not only as a vehicle for portraying oppression but also as a medium for deconstructing and reimagining the boundaries between public and private, individual and collective. Its greatest potency lies in its transformative potential, opening up the potential for social change through a profound engagement with the constructed nature of political realities. In contesting these boundaries, it affirms the enduring power of language and literature to resist, reshape, and ultimately redefine the contours of authority and identity across both local and global hierarchies.

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Bureaucracies of Memory:

Institutionalized History in Four Contemporary European Novels[1]

Upon winning the 2023 *International Booker Prize* for his novel *Time Shelter*, the Bulgarian author Georgi Gospodinov commented:

> It is commonly assumed that 'big themes' are reserved for 'big literatures,' or literatures written in big languages, while small languages, somehow by default, are left with the local and the exotic. Awards like the International Booker Prize are changing that status quo, and this is very important (Gospodinov 2023).

In the light of this statement, this paper looks into center-periphery dynamics in the European bureaucratic novel of the past decade – a corpus which reveals itself as particularly interested in juggling multiple temporalities by weaving intricate connections (both historical and speculative) – between political pasts, presents, and futures.

First published in Bulgarian in 2020, *Time Shelter* was translated into English by Angela Rodel in 2022. The novel follows an unnamed narrator, and an elusive

psychiatrist named Gaustine. The latter establishes in Zürich a special clinic for people

with Alzheimer's disease. In this facility, each floor recreates a specific decade in intricate

detail, aiming to transport patients back in time to revisit their memories. Tasked with the

collecting of authentic past artifacts for the clinic, the narrator travels across Europe and

its polyphonic histories. Under Gaustine's flair for scenography and atmospheric

restauration, his work enriches the staged, layered setup of the clinic: each floor is so

accurate and comforting in its reconstruction of the past that, soon, healthy people

request to be admitted in order to flee their monotonous, disenchanted present. The idea

becomes widespread, and the number of such clinics increases, to the point where

referendums are held across Europe to decide which past decade each country should

live in, in the future. A redesigned map of the continent presents the results of these

elections by replacing the countries's names with their preferred decade (Gospodinov

2022, 178). As Patrick McGuiness puts it in reviewing the book,

> Across Europe, political parties promote different decades in their national histories.
> Referendums are fought on what particular past a country's future will look like. It's
> funny and absurd, but it's also frightening, because even as Gospodinov plays with
> the idea as fiction, the reader begins to recognise something rather closer to home.
> Time Shelter was written between the Brexit referendum and the (second) Russian
> invasion of Ukraine, both of which represent, in their own ways, the weaponisation
> of nostalgia and the selection of particular eras in the time clinic of the not-so-new
> world order (McGuiness 2022).

This rings particularly true in 2024, a year of numerous rounds of elections

threatened by the looming spectre of far-right nationalism across the continent, wielding

its "weaponisation of nostalgia" with local specificity, yet in sweeping international synchrony.

Aside from the explicitly political content of the book, I was particularly intrigued by Gospodinov's statement made upon receiving the International Booker Prize, quoted in the opening of this article. He refers to international prizes such as Booker as an equalizing force in the uneven and often prejudiced playing ground of literatures written in languages with significantly different spread, visibility, and impact. He talks explicitly of "big languages" and "small languages" while acknowledging that the latter are often exoticized and deemed of local importance only. This statement resonated with CAPONEU's interest in examining the existence of European centers and peripheries in the political novel, with a particular focus on spatial models charting power dynamics and the circulation of cultural capital. Such models include, among other conceptual constructs, the notion of "literary polysystems" (Even-Zohar 1990), the world-system theory (Wallerstein 2004), the hypothesis of a continuum, rather than a strict separation between dominant and dominated literary spaces (Casanova 2005), the combined and uneven development framework (Warwick Research Collective 2015) and, perhaps most recently, discussions on the transnational literary field (Sapiro, 2024).

Blending this interest with my research on contemporary bureaucratic novels (which cannot avoid being political in both subject and interpretation), I have chosen four works to explore how this centre-periphery dynamic plays out – if at all – in recent European literature: Robert Menasse's 2017 *The Capital* [*Die Hauptstadt*], Jean-Philippe Toussaint's 2020 *Les Émotions*, Liliana Corobca's 2017 *The Censor's Notebook* [*Caiet de cenzor*], and Georgi Gospodinov's 2020 *Time Shelter* [*Vremeubezhishte*]. For

methodological ease, I will cite from and refer to the English translations wherever available, namely in three of the four cases.

From the start, a mapping of the works along clear geographical delineations is impossible, mostly thanks to the quasi-unanimous lack of overlap between the four authors' countries of origin (Austria, Belgium, Moldova, Bulgaria), the countries in which they publish, roughly matching the languages they write in (German, French, Romanian, Bulgarian), and the countries in which their narratives are set (roughly, Belgium, Poland, Romania, Switzerland and Bulgaria). Although at first glance the corpus is relatively balanced between Eastern and Western Europe, which would approximate a core and a peripheral positionality, it is easy to notice how regional configurations complicate the image by bringing into discussion historical border shifts, linguistic hegemonies, and even migration patterns, therefore repeating the center-periphery model under different lenses and at different scales: the Bulgarian author is based in Berlin, the Moldovan author writes her novel after decades of research in Romanian Communist archives, the novel written by the Austrian author wins the German Book Prize, finally, the novel written in French does without an English translation, whereas the others do not, and so on.

Despite this geopolitical patchwork able to seed confusion and disputes among scholars of national literatures – while delighting the literary comparatists –, the four novels have in common two distinct, yet intersecting thematic threads: (1) the contemporary depiction of bureaucratic infrastructures and (2) the politics of memory and the museification of the past. Whereas administrative narratives set in Brussels (e.g. Robert Menasse's 2017 *The Capital*) or Strasbourg (e.g. Jean-Philippe Toussaint's 2020 *Les Émotions*) that cast satirical or melancholic glances upon EU's institutional history

are routinely produced and read in Western Europe, they fail to reach Eastern European literary markets, which conduces to an associated lack of readerly and writerly interest in the topic. In countries like Bulgaria, Moldova, and Romania, the administrative institutions and processes of the European Union, along with its cultural memory and its raison d'être have not yet been established as literary themes. Contemporary political fiction originally written in Romanian or Bulgarian seems to be, instead, more concerned with the political stakes involved in the institutionalization of history through state-level and state-sanctioned practices. These latter works are also more eager to travel, in translations produced with a greater sense of urgency and into a larger number of European languages. Novels such as the above-mentioned *Time Shelter* and Liliana Corobca's 2017 *The Censor's Notebook* bring to the symbolic center of cultural capital, peripheral stories in which affects (fear, nostalgia), discourses (literature, medicine, ideology), and practices (reading, dwelling) are weaponized for political goals, with significant consequences at all levels: individual, national, and transnational.

We already have a number of analytical frameworks for the understanding of "bureaucratic fiction" (Irimia 2023) in general but, for our present purposes, I am interested here in a specific theory proposed with regard to the emergence of the "EU novel" – a recent subgenre of administrative narratives engaging with European Union institutions and policymaking (Radisoglou 2021). Two of the novels in my corpus – *The Capital* and *Les Émotions* – are largely set in Brussels, casting satirical, realistic, or melancholic glances upon EU's institutional history. More specifically, they engage with the past, present and future of the European Commission, as the European institution *par excellence*. Such novels are usually written, read, and occasionally praised in Western

Europe. In 2022, Menasse's *Die Erweiterung*, a sequel of *The Capital* won the European Book Prize. To this date and to my knowledge, none of the examples mentioned have been translated into Romanian or Bulgarian, for example, which partly explains why they don't have a profound impact in the Eastern European literary landscapes.

At the EU's eastern borders, in particular in the two above-mentioned countries which gained member status together, in 2007, the institutional culture of the Union, as well as the memory and ambitions of its creation have not been considered as topics of literary interest. Romania and Bulgaria are, in a certain sense, already situated in EU's periphery in terms of geopolitical setting; what interests us here however is their placing in the periphery of its imagery – and here I understand "periphery" in the sense proposed by the Warwick Research Collective (2015), not in terms of geography but in terms of "inclusion." Although formalized over 17 years ago, this inclusion – as well as its reciprocal sense of belonging – are still ongoing processes, especially at the level of symbolic forms and socio-aesthetic representations.

Instead of playing with the imagery of EU administration, contemporary political fiction originally written in Romania or Bulgaria seems, at least judging by the two examples taken here, to continue be more concerned with the high stakes of the politics of memory and the institutionalization of history at *state level*, through *state-sanctioned* practices, such as national referendums and state censorship of literary works. Through their translation into English (both acknowledged by important prizes), novels such as *Time Shelter* and *The Censor's Notebook* bring from the periphery to the center stories in which affects (fear of repression, nostalgia for an idealized past), discourses and practices are weaponized for political goals, with significant consequences at individual,

national, and transnational levels. By discourses I refer to their shared treatment of jargons derivative from medicine, history, nationalist ideologies, literary criticism or pop culture references, whereas the practices they focus on include actual literary writing, reading, editing, but also housing policies and institutional administrative procedure.

The Censor's Notebook is a compelling exploration of censorship in the 1970s and 1980s in Communist Romania, from an unusual perspective: the censor's herself. The reader gets access to the (fictionalized) personal writings on work notebooks – doubling as diary – of a woman censor. The documents have seemingly escaped destruction and resurface, decades after the fall of the regime, to help research its memory. It's useful to mention that these particular two decades, following the so called 'July theses' pronounced by Ceausescu in 1971, had been marked by strict government control over creative works, a reinforcement of state censorship, and an unstable index of banned books and authors. The novel's protagonist, Filofteia Moldovean, is a fictional dedicated, meticulous state censor coming from a rural background and poverty during the forced modernization of the state. Her personal notes, written beyond her official duties and as a commentary thereof, provide insight not only into the inner workings of the censorship apparatus, responsible for an ideologically aligned curation of the past, but also into the moral dilemmas faced by censors, and the often-absurd lengths to which the state goes to suppress dissent.

Engrossed in her work well beyond the working hours and complaining of all sorts of physical ailments produced by her sedentary duties, Filofteia begins to question the morality of her role and the political purposes of censorship itself. Thanks to her professional skills, towards the end of the novel, she is promoted and co-opted into a

fictional organization, the so-called "World Organization of Censors" (WAC) with the "Central European Censorship Lodge" as its main branch (Corobca 2022, 344) – which acts as a shadow-double of the world literary canon, and whose invisible work shapes the world literary system in ways known only to these mysterious employees enacting the policies of their respective states. The novel delves into themes of freedom, creativity, and the power dynamics between the state and the individual, but also between national and transnational interests that instrument similar practices to different ends: "We're laying the groundwork for a singular literature, a singular sensibility, we're training the Censor for his new mission. Poetry passes through all curtains, even the one made of iron. We're trying to break through borders, walls, differences. The Great Peace and the Great Censorship embrace" (Corobca 2022, 329).

An international cast is also deployed in *The Capital*, whose main plotline turns Brussels into a funhouse of nonsensical regulations and embarassing acronyms on the occasion of the European Commission's 50th anniversary (this is in direct reference to another institutional anniversary, mocked in another Austrian writer's novel: Robert Musil's 1930 famous *The Man Without Qualities*). Menasse's book begins with a chaotic scene in a Brussels plaza where a runaway pig causes commotion. This incident ties into a larger economic issue for the EU, as China, the largest importer of pork, opts to negotiate with individual EU countries instead of the union. The management of pork within the EU Commission is divided among different directorates (AGRI, GROW, and TRADE), leading to bureaucratic clashes and satire. The plot centers on the neglected Culture Department in the Directorate-General of Communication, led by a Cypriot-Greek woman eurocrat. While hoping to secure visibility and praise for a promotion to a

department with a better reputation, she takes on the organization of a significant jubilee to celebrate the commission's 50ᵗʰ anniversary but delegates most of the work to her assistant, Martin Susman. An Austrian intellectual and idealist, he sees the celebration as an opportunity to highlight the EU's founding principle as a reaction to the horrors of global conflagrations and the Holocaust, so he starts looking for survivors of the Holocaust to include in the celebrations. The narrative also follows his brother, Florian Susman, head of the European Pig Producers, who narrowly escapes death after being run over a cab driver profiting off disoriented groups of refugees headed to the train station. Florian is rescued by a Muslim woman, and the moment creates a poignant press image that gains international attention. Underneath the plot's immediate surface lies a critical examination of the history of the European Commission, its present relevance, as well as its future under the sign of many crises brought about by austerity policies and unpopular management of resources, Brexit, permanent tensions between long-term collaboration and short-term national interests, refugee crises, a general disconnect between institutions and citizens, further eroded by foreign interference (mainly from China).

The concept of European identity and the idealistic rhetoric of its institutional self-representation are given center-stage, along with the multiple challenges that call them into question. This exploration of unity, diversity, and belonging within the EU references on several occasions the division between the north and the south of the continent, but not so much the one between its east and west, still bearing the scars of the Iron Curtain fractures. The novel features most prominently France, Belgium, Germany and Italy, while also accounting for historical turmoil and current debates in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary, but makes little to no reference to the latest

additions to the EU: countries like Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria remain invisible, although the novel is written 4, and respectively 10 years after these countries joined the EU.

As of yet untranslated into any other language from the original French, *Les Émotions*, the other novel preoccupied with the European Commission, offers a less nuanced and less diverse portrayal of the inner workings of the institution, with even less concern for peripheric identities. It is 'central' to the core, with a focus on the Commission going back to the literal construction of its headquarters in the Berlaymont building in Brussels (the narrator's brother is an architect involved in the project). The protagonist's father had been a European Commissioner himself, further intertwining the narrator's family history with that of the European institution.

The protagonist's job, himself an employee of the Commission, is to imagine various scenarios in order to anticipate the future unfolding of current European crises. Starting from presently available data and drawing from past patterns, he is trying to peer into the future of the EU in order to help inform policymakers of the implications of their choices. This role requires him to navigate the complexities of policymaking, but not so much those of cultural interplay. The subtle power dynamics at play within the Commission are relegated to the narrative background, while most of the reader's attention is directed to the inner life of this office worker, brimming with romantic or melancholic musings as he walks the corridors and passageways of the institution. As such, the narrative alternates between a very personal past (even when interlinked with the history of the Commission), present institutional crises, and plausible public futures, providing at least a layered, if not compelling exploration of the view that public futures

are easier to anticipate than the private ones. I would say that here the center/periphery dynamic is not played out in terms of geopolitics or forms of inclusion, but rather in relation to an institutional center and the multiple, peripheral subjectivities that populate it.

The novel emphasizes how emotions influence and are influenced by the political environment, shedding light – like *The Capital* - on the human side of the European Commission. It portrays the institution not just as a monolithic entity but as a set of processes that are always already in the making and remain ever incomplete, shaped by the performances of individuals who are swinged not only by reason but also by affects, hazard, and interpersonal dynamics. As indicated in its title, the novel tries to show the impact of personal histories and emotions on the broader political landscape, but also on the handling of day-to-day crises. An exemplary scene in this regard is how the Commission's staff had to manage the severe disruption of air travel across a large chunk of Europe following the eruption of an Icelandic volcano in 2010.

These all-too-brief summaries show that all four novels share a common preoccupation with the administration of memory and the political manipulation of the past in view of an uncertain future and a present that is always under the sign of crises. In all four cases, this process is inextricably linked to metaphors of pathology, highlighting both psychological malaise and physical sickness as consequences of administrative paperwork that feels removed from individual and collective realities and affects. The censor experiences physical discomfort performing her duties, piles of documents proliferate like tumors, the commission workers suffer from depression, and the time shelters function as clinics and asylums that, through distorted nationalist rhetoric, expand to encompass entire nations.

Whatever it is we mean by the EU novel – and Radisoglou's article throws some leads as to what it could mean – these four examples make clear the fact that the European identity and institutional imagery is, rather intuitively, far more pronounced in its geo-political core than at the periphery. The bureaucratic fiction coming from countries with a longer history in the EU (but most importantly, closer to its centers of power) display more concern with the state of the union, its functioning and deficiencies, its history and its institutions, down to architectural details and office space arrangements. They also have a greater ease in using EU's institutional jargon than bureaucratic fiction written by contemporary authors from new member states. Testifying to their incomplete inclusion, the Romanian and Bulgarian novels hint to a desire for a continental sense of belonging and a collective European identity (especially in the case of the Bulgarian writer living in Berlin) but that is far from being their main narrative focus; they ultimately remain still more heavily anchored in their national context and unresolved traumas of their communist past.

Another important observation is the fact that the Eastern novels imagine new international institutions (which happen to be quite absurd), such as WAC, Corobca's World Association of Censors, or Gospodinov's quickly expanding Swiss-based network of *time shelters* that takes over the entire Europe. At the same time, the Western novels proceed to fantasize upon existing institutions: the European Commission is clearly in the spotlight, with the European Parliament and the Council making only tangential appearances). Western authors chose to de-familiarize EU's routine and its unglamorous reputation in public perception, whereas the novelists in the East create more abstract

bureaucratic apparatuses that emerge from local contexts but point to universal threats and dilemmas.

Additionally, this corpus of contemporary European novels engaging with administration and the politics of memory poses the unavoidable question of multilingualism. Given that EU's linguistic diversity is an important factor in its negotiations of various crises, as well as in its everyday operations, this comes as no surprise. It highlights, however, both the potential for miscommunication and the wealth of nuance (political or otherwise) that different languages bring to EU's identity and culture. *The Capital* plays a lot with this: the novel has fragments in Dutch, French, Polish, Czech, and Italian. The theme of linguistic diversity receives less attention in *Time Shelter*, a novel which focuses on material artefacts and memorabilia rather than language differences. Multilingualism is largely absent in the other novels: the presence of other languages but French is only briefly acknowledged in *Les Émotions*, whereas Corobca's fictional censor drops some aphorisms in Latin and French but only to show off as an educated, overqualified employee, playing with the vocabulary of (past) cultural hegemonies, rather than a depiction of contemporary linguistic multiculturalism and shared European values. This linguistic asymmetry reflects broader power dynamics within European cultural institutions, where certain languages continue to dominate literary and bureaucratic spaces.

The question of language is also important from a literary sociology perspective: the novels from the periphery achieve a degree of success – translated into prestigious prizes such as Gospodinov's 2023 International Booker Prize and the 2023 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize awarded to Corobca's novel – only after being translated

into English. This also contributes to reinforcing their authorial status at home as well. The other two novels are well received within their original linguistic boundaries (see the German Book Prize won in 2017 by *The Capital* and the European Book Prize awarded in 2023 to its sequel) and, for them, translations into English and wider international appeal feel more like an option than a requirement. However, as the nature of the prizes shows, it may happen that the peripherical novels achieve recognition well outside of the EU-space, which is not always the case for novels from EU's center: *Les Émotions*, for example, has only been translated into German, and will appear in English translation in 2025. *The Capital*, on the other hand, has been translated to date into 11 languages, including Hindi and Arabic, but has only won European prizes. These four works ultimately reveal that Europe's novelistic production is neither homogenous, nor monolithic. Rather, it reveals itself as a complex ecosystem where asymmetrical power dynamics (linguistic and political, among others) intersect with historical narratives and institutional memory-making. As a potential subgenre of the political novel, the bureaucratic novel emerges as a critical lens through which we can examine the ongoing negotiations of centrality and peripherality in contemporary Europe.

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Response to Alexandra Irimia:

"Bureaucracies of Memory. Institutionalized History in Four Contemporary

European Novels"

Alexandra Irimia has insightfully charted out some contours of cultural registration within the capitalist world-system through "novels" about "politics" authored by those from or in conversation with peoples of the East European "periphery." Here I want to consider these three keywords—novels, politics, periphery— to suggest some hesitations about these as categories for our future group considerations.

From a world-systems knowledge movement perspective, the "Eastern European" nation-states are categorically not peripheries, but are zemiperipheries (previously spelled as semiperipheries) (Deckard, Niblett, and Shapiro). Peripheral nation-states are those whose entanglement within world markets are largely continuations in a different form of an economic dependency structured by their former imperial colonizers and whose economic exchanges are often limited to a narrow range of commodities, usually those involving the primary processing industries of monocrop agriculture, natural resource extraction, and a spectrum of legal and illegal migrant labor. Institutions of political representation and legitimacy are rarely autonomous or even persistent. In the terms of academic disciplinary domains, the peoples of the periphery are more

anthropologized than sociologized. Their internal social divisions tend to simplifying divisions of massifying blocs (i.e. Indigenous versus creole; majority ethnic versus minority ethnic).

Zemiperipheries function differently. They have a different set of affordances and limits within the world-system and greater immixtures of social classifications. Their political institutions look more towards those of the core and their governments often seek to be integrated within various global unions and associations. The zemiperipheries often function as the cotter pins between the core nation-states and the peripheries as well as the shock absorber for conflicts, especially amongst core nations. Their regions experience combined and uneven development as a constitutive and normative feature, unlike the peripheries which experience it in more extreme, although limited geographically, forms. Zemiperipheries often are ones of multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic contacts and histories of mutable fragmentation and re-assembly.

Even in this sketch, we might see that there is a categorical misapplication in labelling the Eastern European lands as peripheries. To be sure, less empowered than the core, but not marginalized in the ways that peripheries must contend against. Individuals of peripheral lands rarely get their academic and artistic talent sent to conferences in a core capital outside of explicit nation-state labelling and surveillance. Irimia's discussion of their chosen evidentiary texts exemplify zemiperipherality, rather than peripherality.

Getting the categories right is not merely a case of nominalism. For the terms provide a context for considering the cultural effects and artifacts of the European zemiperipheries (a term of spatial logistics that also exists *within* core nation-states). It is

a world-culture axiom that the zemiperipheries are the regions of greatest cultural innovation, often *in advance* of the core regions. And much of what has been conventionally considered *modernism* is generated by zemiperipheral actors within the core nation-state (Shapiro and Barnard). Furthermore, zemiperipheral regions also transmit culture laterally through one another. A critique of political science is that it reifies zemiperipheral circulation and transmissions under terms of "area studies," a category of a single unit, rather than set of transversal and manifold relations. Our task, though, is to undo, to un-think, older conventional terms and associations.

In this light, ought we to focus on "the novel"? Immanuel Wallerstein argued that three "ideologies" emerged from the late eighteenth century tumult of world-wide revolutions and rebellions — conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism (Wallerstein). While conservatives favored social organization by small groups, and radicals looked to mass collectives, liberals favored sovereignty managed by so-called meritocratic "talent." Although liberals were arguably less wealthy than conservative forces and numerically smaller than the laboring class, they managed to become dominant. A mechanism for this success was the creation of disciplinary apparatuses and new forms of knowledge through the reconstruction of the credentializing university. As Foucault tirelessly explained, power in this period was no longer mainly enacted through repression, but with the production of binary classifications and categories (and here Foucault chastised Marx for also adhering to binary splits). One powerful knowledge lever was the division between the public sphere (disembodied, rational) and the intimate or private sphere (of interiority, *Bildung*, affect). A highly effective cultural technology that emerged to become dominant *to produce and maintain* this division was the long-form fiction we call "the novel" (Shapiro

2021). The novel simultaneously enabled the creation of a national imaginary (fiction, along with the other arts, remains overwhelmingly framed by national identities) as well as a device to train readers into an affective sense of possessing an individualizing liberal self.

The novel became the entrance ticket for non-core nation-states to participate in liberal development ideology. To be taken as serious on the world-market stage various cultural items were needed including, but not limited to, a statist, normative language (Hochdeutsch, Queen's English, etc.) and a "great" national novel.

Today, though, liberalism is in crisis and decay everywhere, as are the other nineteenth-century arising ideologies. The older triplet of ideologies seems to be replaced by a newer one: Fascism, Neoliberalism, and the Intersectional Left (Shapiro 2024). Consequently, ought we expand our horizon beyond liberalism's normative cultural instrument, "the novel" (Bekhta)? To be clear, this does not mean abandoning interest in long-form fiction. Instead, we may suggest a lack of obedience to the category of "the novel" and the interpretive, critical techniques designed to respond to this category. When world-systems proponents talk about a knowledge movement, it desires an un-doing, an unthinking of these older epistemic forms to reshape a new politics, a new social movement. Should we allow adherence to a particular literary form category and thus lose the insights of recent cultural achievements like *Skibidi Toilet*, the web series that stages a Pere Ubuesque conflict between residues of Soviet statism and technophilic neoliberals, and Radu Jude's *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World* (2023), which uses video immixture (historic stock and spontaneously instagrammed) to express the combined and uneven development facing the newer EU member-states?

And "politics"? The late Fredric Jameson has recently been published as arguing that the ferment of '"French Theory" in the postwar period began to dissolve with France's increasing embedment within the EU, as nation-state identity gave way to one as a member-state (Jameson). Here Robert Menasse's *The Capital* (*Die Haupstadt*, 2017) seeks to provide the European Union with its own calling card for a core's "total systems" novels in a post-national fashion, but one that loses the bite of earlier efforts like Alexander Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930/1933/1943) in order to adapt the writing better to a liberal palette. But this erasure of earlier efforts to better accommodate a diminishing audience of liberal readers reveals a greater historical analogy than difference, especially to periods when liberal democracy is failing before an insurgent extreme right-wing. Is the urgent warning light about the cadences of the 1930s and the contaminated air of its zones of interest best served by a retrospective view of the discreet charms of EU bureaucracy? Is politics a term meaning primarily administrative institutionalization and tales of its operation or should we be stretching our horizon to discern the features of something else?

In the aftermath of the German Green party's loss of the youth vote to the extreme right, the board of the youth group collectively resigned to create a new party. Their first web video begins with statement slogan, *We're no longer ready* [*Wir sind nicht länger bereit*] to denounce a politics they find oriented to the wealthy and the fascistic. The slogan both indicates a rejection of both the older forms of resistance (the DDR youth pioneer's slogan – *Always ready* [*Immer bereit*] as well as the 1989's one of collectivity *We are the people* [*Wir sind das Volk*]). How these still inchoate energies will condense

remains still unclear, but the youth spirit of *No more kidding around* (*Schluss mit lustig*) might be a beacon worth reaching for today.

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A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center:

Norman Manea's *Plicul negru* (1986) / *The Black Envelope* (1995)

The Return of the Hooligan (2003) and *The Lair* (2009), Norman Manea's highly acclaimed novels written in exile, transmute his artistic endeavours and political struggle as a dissenter under Ceauşescu's regime*.* Less known, but equally important and a very powerful political text*,* is the novel *Plicul Negru* (1986)*,* for which he doggedly fought with the communist censorship.

We distinguish two main types of genetic rites in Norman Manea's writing. The first is represented by the process of writing and rewriting before the exile, on the one hand caused by the pressure of censorship and on the other hand generated by the desire for continuous chiselling. He has written and rewritten texts that grew from his own texts, such as the political short story *The Interrogation* (2005), which originated in an excerpt from the novel *The Book of the Son* (1976). The second creative trigger refers to the rewriting of his novels after his exile in 1986: *The Black Envelope, Atrium, Captives, The Book of the Son*.

The novel *The Black Envelope* serves as a link between the two processes. The story of this book is provided by two sources: first there is a testimonial essay, *Censor's Report*, included in the volume *On Clowns: The Dictator and The Artist: Essays* (Manea, 1992), with explanatory notes of the censored author, then there is Matei Călinescu's article from the Boston Sunday Globe on June 11, 1995, which was translated into Romanian by Liviu Petrescu and included as an afterword in the third revised edition of 2003.

After the first edition in 1986, Norman Manea rewrote the book in exile, but the manuscript was published first as an English translation (1995) before it was handed to the Romanian publisher Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române (1996), and then again to the same Romanian publishing house where the first version of the book came to light, Editura Cartea Românească (2003). The fourth and fifth editions were published by Polirom (2007, 2024). Therefore, we could speak of two variants of the same novel, the *editio princeps* and the revisited text which was reedited in Romanian four times, and in translation, in more than ten countries.

Therefore, we can discuss two versions of the same novel: the *editio princeps* and the revisited text, which was re-edited in Romanian four times and received translations in more than ten countries.

Writing under Censorship and Self-Censorship

The inescapable pressure of censorship, which was dominating the literary scope of Romania in the 1980s, interfered with the process of writing and rewriting in many

aspects, all the more so as it actually led to self-censorship at some point. It not only stimulated continuous searches for reformulations, additions, opacities, but eventually put its stamp on the author's writing to such an extent that the Aesopian language contributed to the formation of a convoluted style, with which the readers at the time were familiar. *The Black Envelope* therefore underwent a double rewriting–the one imposed by censorship, then the one (self-)imposed by the need to adapt to different kinds of readers–not only American or European (via translations), but also the Romanian public, basically the contemporary audience unaccustomed to the labyrinth of the metaphorical discourse.

The censor's report of *Plicul Negru* received by Norman Manea in 1985 and published after his emigration is among the few accessible texts of its kind from the period. It sheds a light on the practices of the political apparatus and gives a valuable insight into the writer's laboratory, whose creation, in the early 1980s, was under the pressure of a more perfidious compulsory self-censorship than ever before: the institution of censorship, the Department of the Press, had been officially abolished, increasing the confusion. The rationale behind the abolition was that self-censorship and mutual surveillance were already enough after three decades of totalitarian rule. However, as the number of disturbing texts increased, the Council for Socialist Culture and Education's Reading Service implemented alternative intermediary measures.

Moreover, the tortured publication of this book took place after the consolidation of the cultural mini-revolution started by Nicolae Ceaușescu with the famous theses of July 1971 and finalized with the theses of 1983. It legitimised the communist party's intensification of its leading role in the educational and cultural fields; for example, it

provided for strict control of publishing policies, in order to support the publication of militant, propagandist books and to prevent the publication of those that did not conform to the ideology of socialist neo-realism (Deletant 2006, 176-178).

The history of this novel, from its submission as a manuscript up to its publication, involved various stages: first, in the spring of 1985, the writer handed the manuscript assembled from hundreds of tortured pages to the publisher Cartea Românească. It was only in December that he received a reply, with a crushing series of suggestions that substantially crippled the text by no less than eighty percent, in other words, the book was declared unpublishable. Despite numerous hesitations, the writer attempted to make some modifications, but the censors rejected the manuscript once more, deeming no real change had occurred.

At the time, Norman Manea was weighing three alternative options: hope for political change, publishing the book abroad, or the last resort of giving up and postponing the publication for posterity. On the other hand, the urge to get the novel published even under those circumstances became a challenge he needed to face, and tested his resources to the limit. Struggling with the fear of another negative verdict, the writer was thinking of giving up: "As I wrote I was struggling with the impossible around and within myself. Every day I resolved to stop writing [….] And yet I wrote! A single obsession focused my worries: that my book should not be co-opted by the system!" (Manea 1992, 69)

After resuming the ordeal of making the requested changes, without, however, basically resolving them, as the author admitted, the manuscript was verified by another reader, a substitute reviewer, unofficially commissioned by the publisher to help with the

publication of the book. In those ambiguous times, when authors received anonymous censoring reviews, Romanian publishing houses were forced to find creative ways in order to preserve a certain standard for their publications (Manea 1992, 72). The last page of the *editio princeps* book, 480, reads: "Lector: Magdalena Bedrosian", about whom Norman Manea writes in the note on the 2005 edition of *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul*: "I owe much to my editor and friend Magdalena Bedrosian, not only an acute reader, but also a moral support, an understanding interlocutor with a book that is not at all in the spirit of the political prose of the time"[1] (Manea 2005, 6). As none of his books are; fortunately, there were still honest intellectuals in the book publishing industry whose solidarity helped nonconformist writers like Manea to publish their works.

Norman Manea received the final suggestions for changes in April 1986. The censor eventually submitted the revisited text for publication, after a meeting with the deputy minister of culture. In the summer of 1986, *The Black Envelope*, published in an unexpectedly large print run of twenty-six thousand copies, sold out in a matter of days, the public success was followed by favourable critical and literary acclaim, and the literati assured the writer in particular that the substitute version had retained its critical sharpness and literary originality.

The public success of such novels was no surprise at the time. In the authoritarian regime under which writers like Norman Manea needed to write in order to be published, while anticipating the censors' requests, they relied on the readers' wise complicity. They resorted to metaphorical artifices in the hope that they would be decoded by the reader, remaining opaque to the censor at the same time. The

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[1] Translation mine; all translations in the text from Romanian into English are mine.

improvised hermeticism was useful because –ideally –it acted to fraternise with the reader and circumvent the censor. Expecting their readers to read between the lines, the writers were writing between lines: "the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing ... between the lines" (Strauss 1988, 24).

As a result of the forced codifications that led to stylistic excess, opacity, and detours, the text became partially distorted by the very tricks it used to avoid being censored. On the other hand, a gain was also the achievement of the aforementioned goal: the book was no longer recoverable for the system, nor was its substitute, which had passed through the censors' strict examination to become publishable. Under dictatorships, writers of fiction must assume a double folded mission, both ethical and aesthetical (Turcuş 2016), in line with their readers' political expectations: "Readers in Eastern Europe looked to literature for what they could not find in the newspaper or in history or sociology textbooks. They chased truth between the lines, while the author accepted the distortion of his artistic work" (Manea 2012, 78).

Insights into the novelist's writing lab

The censor's report gives many insights into the original manuscript of the novel, which has never been published as such: whereas the 1986 *editio princeps* did not reproduce the original version because of the censorship, the 1995/1996 editions did not mean a return to the original text either. The latter is a much shorter text, by a

process of reduction that Matei Călinescu appreciatively called "the cryptic writing, the main stylistic feature of *The Black Envelope*" (Călinescu 2003, 274).

In order to see to what extent Norman Manea complied with the numerous indications in the anonymous censor's report, we can trace their trajectory through an applied reading of the two versions of this novel: 1986 edition and the 1996 edition. This report, which is quoted in full in *On Clowns…,* is an invaluable document for understanding how the famous secret word police functioned in terms of concrete intervention in the text. It is almost astonishing, however, that repeated recommendations (the censors sent the manuscript back three times) could not change many allusions or scenes with an obvious critical, overtly political direction. What Norman Manea has managed to achieve, in essence, by this resistance to repeated pressure from the censors, is that he has protected his work from being turned into non-literature by breaking the balance between historical constraints and the writer's freedom, a balance so difficult to maintain when political constraints are represented by the elaborate operations of an active, effective, institutionalised censorship (even after its apparent abolition).

The report begins with a brief introduction to the book's characters and the scenes that develop around them, written in a dry and repetitive manner, but not without a certain synthetic skill of reviewing. After a little more than three pages of presentation of the novel, there are clear ideological recommendations, aimed at the structural revision of the book, a prerequisite for publication. The thorniest issue seemed to be the allusive comparison between two dictatorships – the Antonescu's Fascist regime and the contemporary Ceaușescu's totalitarian nationalist regime. In this regard, the

recommendation was to direct the idea of the resurrection of the forces of evil not towards the country itself, but towards the contemporary Western world. However, the published novel did not make any of these direct recommended changes.

The reviewer strongly advised against any note on murders and deportations in Romania, and it asked to revisit the image of the rows of the dead that Dominic often evokes. Nonetheless, Manea did not abandon the image in question. Anatol Dominic Vancea Voinov's vision of his father, very possibly assassinated by the Romanian Legionnaires, is connected with a metaphorical string of characters carrying candles in the night, an intertext observed by Matei Călinescu as descending from *O făclie de Paşte* (*An Easter Candle*; Caragiale 1892), a classic text on anti-Semitism in Romanian literature. Both Leiba Zibal, Caragiale's protagonist, and Anatol's father, are successful Jewish wine merchandisers and both are portrayed in dramatic circumstances: the former is almost killed by a revengeful servant, Gheorghe; the latter is believed to be murdered by a resentful rejected suitor, a member of the Iron Guard.

The censor also drew attention to the titles showing that there was an anti-fascist movement in Romania, suggesting a revision of the bibliographical records of the retired journalist Gafton – but the addition operated by the novelist is accompanied by critique, because, after reading in an academic journal a list of intellectuals considered to have thought against fascism, a second character, a highly educated lady, expresses her doubts about it. Although the report objects to the exaggerated, one-sided importance of the study on which Matei Gafton is working, intended to keep alive the memory of the past evil (i.e. the fascist abuses), Norman Manea does not only ignore the criticism, but also comments on this in a twist, again as if justifying his choice and his defiance to the

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reader: "Mr Gafton thought about the studies he had been working on, unpaid, for many years. He wanted to keep his memory alive (...) he was warned that people don't like to be reminded of their troubles. They prefer to forget" (Manea 1986, 47-48).

There is a news story in the novel that various characters discuss heatedly: the neighbours' attack on a single woman living in an apartment with her cats, followed by its burning and devastation. Obviously, the episode does not go unnoticed by the censors, all the more so because the militia, when called to the scene, does not intervene. It is the re-launching of evil, the threatening relapse of the past, that Gafton speaks of in his study (moreover, the victim's family suggests towards the end of the book that she was burned in Hitler's crematoria). The symbolism of the Holocaust is reprimanded by the censor, the motivation of the fable being considered a diversion. Nevertheless, the motif of devastation is repeated several times throughout the book, even mentioning the interference and duplicity of the authorities.

Most of the recommendations, in the wooden language of the time, refer to the necessity of reconfiguring the novel which is "one-sided, predominantly negative view of daily life". The main overt requirement concerns "its ideological message", which "would find fuller expression and be enriched by a plea for involvement, for integration into a stable, authentic society, and by the positive development of characters in that direction" (Manea 1992, 78). In the censor's opinion, the novelist has to make an improvement of the text by dropping some chapters, comments, excessive statements in terms of caricature, irony, grotesqueness, and supplementing them with some positive, affirmative insertions which would contribute to a more nuanced vision. As the censor rightly notes, the novel is fraught with human degradation and immorality, and a series

of typical characters of the everyday grotesque proliferate. In contrast, the protagonists, trying to preserve their dignity and moral integrity, face inadequacy and inadaptability– the dominant characteristics of Norman Manea's anti-heroes. The report recommends the protagonist should understand that living in pretence and indifference is not a solution: there should be at least a vague possibility of integration in life. The simulation of a madness à la Hamlet, in his attempt to elucidate the death of his father is not accidental; all in all, the visits of the father's spectre would be the first sign of a hallucination that later turns out to be pathological. In the end, at the censor's request, the suicide of Anatol's lover, Irina, is not explicitly mentioned by the novelist (unlike in the original manuscript); on the other hand, there are enough explicit references to a generalised insanity, which seems to devour the protagonist's destiny: Tolea fraternises with the patients of Dr Marga's psychiatric hospital, in an allegory of the entire alienated society of the time.

Therefore Tolea's integration did not take place, nor could it have, given that the very structure of this character did not allow such an evolution. In other words, even the vaguest simulacrum of integration would have led to his elimination altogether. Dominic Anatol Vancea Ivanov's task is to give substance to the idea of alienation of the whole society, his end in Dr. Marga's psychiatric hospital (clearer in the new edition, but also quite discernible in the first edition) seems to be the only way, a solution that shows precisely the disintegration of the human being incapable of adaptation. After all, even the censor in the introductory passage of the report seems to have understood the personality of the protagonist, in an explanation for his mental condition, based on the unfavourable historical context, the family drama, the character's psychological

sensitivity. "At heart (...) he is a tired, sad, lonely man. A discontented and disillusioned man who tries through false carelessness and caricature to resist, to refuse to adapt to a life of conformity and compromise" (Manea 1992, 79).

The author does not comply with the moralizing recommendations, advice, or even direct requests, which drew attention to the deep flaws in the moral profile, human relations and general atmosphere within the working collectives depicted in his prose. Although the censor accurately notices and disapproves of the collective portrayal of the miserable employees of the Tranzit hotel (made up only of uneducated, primitive people, loafers, rumour peddlers, snitches, wage-earners, who cover their business by arranging rooms for the occasional amorous encounters of their bosses of all kinds), Norman Manea again evades the injunction and the overall impression of the published novel stays the same as described in the report.

The reviewer mentions the imperative need for an addition: to include secondary characters, or even a main character, as positive images of life, e.g. the image of Bucharest in the beautiful days of spring could offer numerous sequences, luminous, background characters. In response to this suggestion, the writer seems to have deliberately resorted to irony, caricaturing the language of propaganda: "The merry street. The women were blooming and somewhere far away, in the woods (...) birds were heard, really"; "our chic Bucharest, graceful and slender, pretty, feminine and spirited, petit Paris, once upon a time…"; "cheerful spring, (...) the newspapers were also cheerful, always optimistic, full of information and appeals written with that pedagogical confidence in a perpetual spring. People certainly deserve the bright future, as well as the victories of the present, day after day" (Manea 1986, 7-8).

If the censor also asked for a revision of the image of the urban landscape, presented only through negative, depressing, grotesque aspects: dirty and smelly streets, tired and aggressive people, primitivism, overcrowding in trams and trolleybuses, queues at grocery stores, mud, darkness, this is exactly the atmosphere that the novel gives off in its published form. Transport is congested, long-waited and slow-moving. The urban space is mixed, contaminated; a relevant illustration is the entrance to the shabby headquarters of the mysterious Deaf-Mute Association, with narrow, filthy steps and a dark corridor. The Association of Deaf-Mute Silence, ruled by an almighty network (a metaphor of the Romanian Securitate) may be interpreted, as the author also admits, as a literary reference to Ernesto Sábato's "Report on the Blind" from the novel *On Heroes and Tombs*. It also functions as an epitome of the voiceless, the ordinary people who are anonymised and oppressed by the totalitarian state.

The main narratological difference between the two versions of this novel is the presence of Mynheer, *Autorele*. In *editio princeps* the character was standing for the auctorial voice: the Author's "substitute" is in the process of writing the novel, in an attempt to parallel the reader's endeavour of reading a text which is in the making. The 1995 edition yields the usual omniscient narrator, without including Mynheer at all – a somehow regrettable renunciation, according to Matei Călinescu, which I agree with.

But one of the central themes of the novel, that of substitutes, prevails in the second edition as well: from healthcare to entertainment, from victuals, like bread and coffee to books and education, all sectors of the social ensemble are tinged by inauthenticity and a mischievous substitution of cause for effects, "the main purpose of which was to redirect public dissatisfaction away from the Communist party and

Securitate" (Manea 1992, 65) toward those aspects produced by the mechanisms of power. It is precisely substitution that is strongly amended by the censor, who is precisely aware of its function in the novel, namely to suggest the idea of generalised mendacity that characterised the whole of society: "Let us be clearer about the thesis of substitutes, used on countless occasions, not only in those concerning the relationship between the characters and the writer, the characters and their models in life. These are formulations in which the notion is extended to the whole of social life, to living falsely" (Manea 1992, 80). We find, however, plenty of examples, some of them quoted by the censor, that the writer has kept in *editio princeps*, for example: "joy reproduced mechanically, like a simulacrum. A substitution, only, manipulating substitutes, of emotions, unnatural resources of reactivation" (Manea 1986, 45). [Anatol:] "I am only a substitute. A remnant." (Manea 1986, 53). "We all become something else. If not the reverse of what we really are" (Manea 1986, 183). "A substitute [Tolea], by the very premises of the distribution available to the author Mynheer not merely by the historical conjunction called the substitutes of matter and materials and morals and means" (Manea 1986, 302). In the new edition the reference is no less explicit: "It's a world of substitutes, this circus of ours" (Manea 2012, 14).

In *editio princeps*, so massively censored, the author managed to keep many subversive phrases and fragments: e.g. the passages referring to the striking contrast between the world "before", with its certain values, and the Ceauşescu's regime, contemporary to the reader of the 1980s. The reflections on the human condition are also direct enough to retain their revealing intent. Only the new edition gave the possibility of returning to more direct references, such as an allusion to the dictator's

stammering and the correspondent nickname used by a mentally ill patient: "do you know what the doctor said? If only the comrade were as healthy as you are—you know who he meant! Comrade Jabber-Jabber, Dr. Marga calls him" (Manea 2012, 95). On the other hand, maybe the most astonishing slip of the censors refers to the direct use of Nicolae Ceauşescu's birthday, 26th March, which was dropped in the second edition, maybe because of its obscurity for the contemporary reader. It is the very date of the beginning of the story, when "cosmic events are happening", an ironic defiance of the political context in which the novel had been written, calling for the reader to complete its meaning: "the 26th of March, here! Indeed, the last Thursday of March, the stunning young sign in the zodiac..." (Manea 1986, 11).

All in all, Manea's obstinacy in maintaining the integrity of his text is remarkable, as the changes demanded repeatedly by the censors did not turn *The Black Envelope* into a servile, obedient book. It still remained a "frowning" text, a word repeatedly used by the narrator to express the general discontent of the time: "Frowning... Scowling (...) the street, the world, the universe. (...) And books are frowning too!" (Manea 1986, 97)

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Response to Brînduşa Nicolaescu:

"A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center:

Norman Manea's *Plicul negru* (1986) / *The Black Envelope* (1995)"

I would like to make two points in my response. One of them pertains to the question of the political novel more generally and the second point is a comparative one. While I'm not familiar with contemporary Romanian literature, from Brînduşa's paper I see very interesting comparative parallels that can be drawn to the case of Ukrainian literature. To read Ukrainian literature, and Romanian it seems to me, in a comparative context and in translation requires a lot of explanation of the context – of politics, of movements, of literary field, of the language games, active in a particular historical moment, and so on. I recognize this in Norman Manea's *The Black Envelope,* even if I don't understand a lot of allusions.

1.

I'll begin with the question of the political novel. Based on the workshop programme, a kind of strong *ostensive* definition of the political novel seems clear. For example, Norman Manea's *The Black Envelope* is a political novel because it is a critique of Ceauşescu's Romania, a critique of political apathy and falsehoods in a society under

an oppressive regime – "a stark criticism of a world that has become stultified," to quote Brînduşa's description.

At the same time, how analytically useful is the category of the political novel for reading *The Black Envelope* or for comparing it with other novels in the corpus of the political novel? Its corpus could also look otherwise, if we, for example, would consider the novels that perform a political function from a rhetorical point of view – novels that are written not in opposition to a certain political regime but as part of propaganda, in the neutral sense of the term. This list would include a lot of Soviet socialist literature in the service of glorifying the USSR and critiquing the decadent bourgeois world. So, in a sense, the kind of novels that Manea's censor was asking him to write. Would they be political novels as well?

The same question can be expanded further via the WReC (2015) theory of world literature (or, more properly, word-literature): If modern literature has the capitalist world-system as its ultimate *political* horizon – a horizon, particularly visible from the European and other peripheries, then on what grounds can a theory of specifically *political* literature be most convincingly developed?

It is an interesting hermeneutic problem: Based on the WReC's approach, we could read for the workings of the current world-economy in all modern literature. Similarly, based on Fredric Jameson's (1981) interpretative method, we could read for the 'political unconscious' in any narrative work – in fact, with Jameson we would argue for "the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts" (1). To paraphrase Jameson's own comment from another context – what then becomes of deliberately and fully self-conscious political novels? Are they unconscious expressions of something else still or do they not need decoding or reinterpretation?

2.

I don't have an answer to this question but one further consideration. The position of a writer in Romania in 1980s offers an interesting comparison to the position of a writer in post-1990s Ukraine – and perhaps in post-Soviet Eastern Europe more generally. These two historical points demand a politically-engaged position but in different senses of politics.

I think it's possible to describe contemporary Eastern Europe as a world-literary region where *the social function* of literature is very much foregrounded, visible and active; 'political literature' in this context may be better re-described via Pascale Casanova (2011) as 'combative literature'. Which is to say, all literary production, more or less, in a society in a state of turmoil, in a state of so-called transition to the market with its rampant commodification of every aspect of life, in a state of the decades-long struggle for fair social institutions, in a state of struggle for national self-definition or pure survival amidst Russia's colonial advances. In short, in a situation where politics is not at all perceived as its own separate domain, away from the private sphere and away from art.

A social demand put on literary production and on writers as public figures in this situation is huge – the demand is that they speak to us about the confusing and tragic reality, that they make sense of it, that they address the topics we deem relevant and vital. For example, just last week [25 March 2024], 4000 people came to a poetry evening in Kyiv to listen to Serhiy Zhadan read from his new book; this week [1 June 2024], a three-day literary festival *Book Arsenal* attracted 35 000 people, with this year's theme being "Life between literature and death". Numbers of readers are growing, book sales are growing, bookshops are opening in a country in the middle of a brutal war.

One might say, this is an escapist exercise, a coping mechanism for people living through a tragedy; well, but today there are better escapist channels than poetry, I would say.

The reason why literature, and poetry specifically, occupies a prominent social place in contemporary Ukraine is, I think, quite simply its truth function, its sense- and meaning-making capacity. And this is a demand society puts on its literature and its writers – a demand similar in some sense to the one from the censor to Norman Manea in so far as the writer finds himself in the position of needing to accept or resist such socio-political imperative.

The fact that Manea's *The Black Envelope* had to be so vigorously censored discloses precisely its capacity to reveal something about the society he was writing about. At the same time, as Brînduşa discusses in her paper, his worries were that his book could get "co-opted by the system" and become just like any other book "in the spirit of the 'political' prose of the time". May we then approach the style of *The Black Envelope* as a formal outcome of Manea's need to re-assert his autonomy as an artist and to re-assert the quasi-autonomy of the literary work in aesthetic, and not political terms? Put simply, is his opaque, cryptic, indirect style a move away from politics, even as it comes about as a response to the political situation, in which he wrote?

At this point, I would add another angle to the political novel, which is literary politics in the sense spelled out by Serhiy Zhadan (in reference to his translation of Bertolt Brecht's work): Political literature is not necessarily directed at a political regime but inwardly, at trying to understand your own role in a society and, in the best case, share this understanding with the rest, to make this understanding communal.

All this brings me back to one of the opening questions: Would the kind of novel that Manea's censor was asking him to write be more political than the one he wrote? Political, however, in the unfavorable terms since it would've been in the service of the

wrong kind of power. And is there *a*-political literature? There surely are *differently* political works of literature, not to mention approaches to its interpretation. How do we work with a category, then, that seems to have no outside to itself or no gradation? Put simply, again, how do we *discern* between the kind of political novel that Manea's censor would've wished for and the kind Manea wanted to write?

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Vlastimil Vondruška and the Inevitable Demise of Europe

The aim of this paper is to analyse Vlastimil Vondruška's novel *The Chronicle of the demise of Europe* (2019) in the context of Milan Kundera's concept of Central Europe. This comparison will allow us to understand the context and temporality of Vondruska's vision of Europe's decline and Central European specificities. We will then try to situate Vondruška's work in the political and cultural reality of the Czech Republic and Central Europe. In his famous 1983 essay on Central Europe, Milan Kundera went on to describe this imagined space as 'kidnapped West' – the lost world of Western culture:

> Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space" (Kundera 2023, 37).

This concept of geopolitical-cultural space, as flawed as it may be (see Slačálek 2020), is one of the exemplary texts showing the fixation of Czech opposition intellectuals on the imagined West during the period of communist dictatorship (see also Bolton 2012). After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, a so-called liberal consensus emerged, uniting the

media, public intellectuals and major political parties across the left-right spectrum with the common goal of 'returning to the West'. When some of the main goals were achieved (the Czech Republic joined both NATO and the EU), this consensus began to crumble. Euroscepticism and a backlash against multiculturalism, together with Islamophobia, rose to prominence, both with the conservative (economically neoliberal) right and with seemingly anti-political and pragmatic populism (see, for example, Kopeček 2024, Gjuričová 2009 or Slačálek 2021).

The end of the liberal consensus also marked the beginning of heated debates in the literary field about so-called committed literature (*angažovaná literatura*), which for some (mostly older) generation of critics seemed to be a return to the norms of socialist literature, with its emphasis on correct values and representations rather than on the quality of writing. The younger generation and leftist writers and intellectuals, on the other hand, sought literature and criticism that dealt with important social and cultural issues. In the shadow of these debates, another kind of social criticism in literature grew, this time highly subversive, coming from popular literature and reassessing the meaning of Central Europe and national identities 40 years after Kundera published his essay (see Segi 2021 and 2023).

Vlastimil Vondruška occupies a prominent place among authors who reassess the place of the Czech Republic and the Czechs in Europe and the 'West'. Since 2002, he has been publishing several sequels a year to his extremely popular historical detective stories, and occasionally other prose and popularisation texts. According to the available statistics, he is (by some distance) the most borrowed author in the Czech public

library network and almost all of his books enter the top 10 of the sales charts in Czech bookstores.

He is also a highly controversial writer. After the revolution of 1989, he had to leave his research position as a historian and ethnologist because of his involvement in the Czechoslovak Communist Party. For a long time, his popular novels received virtually no critical response and, at first glance at least, appear to be completely apolitical. Only gradually did they become more and more involved in the context of contemporary culture wars, serving as a template for the natural state of society and culture. For example, one of his historical plays (in which Vondruška himself plays the role of a wise old scribe) is advertised with the following slogan:

> Let us look back to the times when our ancestors defended their country against enemies with weapons in hand [...]. Let us look back to the time when men behaved like knights and no one punished them for sexual harassment, and when it was an honour for women to be women. (Youtube 2016)

With this notion of enemies, brave ancestors and longing for past glories, we can use Umberto Eco's typology of neo-mediavelism from his essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* to conclude that the past in Vondruška's crime novels and plays is clearly the Middle Ages of "national identities, so powerful again during the last century, when the medieval model was taken as a political utopia, a celebration of past grandeur, to be opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination" (Eco 2014, 70). It is therefore unsurprising that his most popular crime novels are set in thirteenth century Bohemia, at the time of the rapid growth of the Bohemian Empire. This serves to provide a stark contrast to the contemporary semi-peripheral position of the Czech Republic.

The conservative or restorative nature of his writing was largely overlooked by critics. Despite Vondruškas' unprecedented success, there was almost no critical reception of his work. It was only after he began publishing his essays in mainstream newspapers and publishing them in collected volumes such as the anti-elitist *Epistles about the Elites and the People* (2018) that historians and fact-checkers began to analyse and criticise different aspects of his work (see, for example, Šorm 2021, Šíma 2022 or Segi 2023).

In his essays, which deal more with general issues of civilisation than with actual politics, Vondruška presents himself as a thinker who is ideologically explicit, seemingly objective, but whose universe of values is close to many of the elements characteristic of the successful Central European amalgam of right-wing conservative populism that emphasises tradition and a strong state, combined with American alt-right rhetoric and the idea of the endangered white man. In his essays, he advocates for the common people against both Czech and European elites, and cautions against the potential dangers of multiculturalism, environmentalism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

A characteristic motif of Vondruška's essays interpreting the present are historical comparisons in which Brussels becomes Rome and the European Union becomes the Roman Empire in its decline. While for Kundera, Central Europe represents the integral space of the West, which has been torn out by historical circumstances ("They cannot be separated from European history; they cannot exist outside it; but they represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders" Kundera 2023, 49.) and which, in contrast, is characterised by the central role of culture ("Their picture of the West, then, is of the West in the past, of a West in which culture had not yet entirely

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bowed out" Kundera 2023, 55.), Vondruška's conception is just the opposite. For him, the European project represents a naive attempt to overcome the "natural" and historically determined state of competing nation-states. The attempt to become 'the West' is only a misguided game of the elites, and the outsiderism of Central Europe makes it possible to see the West as a place where culture stands against human 'nature'. In this case, it is precisely the lower degree of culturalism and detachment from the practice of life that is supposed to represent the civilizational advantage of Central Europeans over the decadence of the West.

The Chronicle

As the author himself argues, he has embodied the ideas from his essays in prose form in a complex, 800 pages long *The Chronicle of the Demise of Europe 1984-2054* (2019), conceived as a synthesis of a memory and a dystopian novel. It takes the form of a chronicle of the (fictional) Wagner family, whose lives take place against the background of (actual) history and who happen to play the more active role in the future. At the time of its publication in 2019, the reader found himself exactly in the middle of the narrative timeline. The first half of the novel, entitled *How it all began*, focuses mainly on the adaptation of the family members to fundamental social changes after 1989. Political, cultural and historical events like the Balkan wars, the Czech integration into European Union, culture wars and migrant crisis gradually influence the lives of the individual characters. The main protagonist of this part is sociologist turned pragmatic businessman Adam Wagner who represents calm rationality while his idealistic ex-wife gradually becomes the main antagonist of the story.

In the second part, titled *How it could end*, the Wagner family, facing the decline of social order and the growing threat of a Muslim military invasion from islamized Germany, turns increasingly to conservatism. Finally, the family and their friends fortify themselves in a private castle, where they fully return to 'traditional' medieval values and successfully resist the German-Muslim army with the help of smuggled Russian weapons.

This dark fantasy of future development, inspired in part by Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*, draws a sharp contrast between the decadent West, rational Central Europe and an East that defies our understanding and therefore cannot be easily judged. [1] In many ways, Vondruška's conception of Central European 'rationality' corresponds to what Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek call "centrist populism"[2]. The politicians Vondruška defends in his essays (and, ultimately, in the novel) are not ideologues and to a large extent distance themselves from the right-wing divide. At the same time, they are able to frame their pragmatism as an opposition to the ideologised West. In the book *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism And Populism*, czech president Miloš zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš are described exactly as pragmatic strong leaders, that Vonduška cannot find in the West:

Zeman took on the mantle of a cultural plebeian loathed by the snobbish Prague elite for his boorish manners (likened to those of the communist apparatchiks of the 1970s and 1980s). The anti-corruption and anti-political (i.e., technocratic) programme which lifted Babiš to power was similarly formal and ideologically empty. (Barša, Hesová and Slačálek 2021, 23)

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[1] Vondruška was critical of virtue-signalling in the first phase of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. It was only after the full-scale Russian invasion that he stopped defending Russia.
[2] Drawing from Groupe d'études géopolitiques (2019).

Both Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš used, above all, the rhetoric of leadership, competences and economic improvement. […] Their majoritarian populism also included some attacks on ethnic or religious minorities and outsiders but no more than was standard among other political forces (only Zeman's Islamophobia was much higher than this standard). Both brought about depoliticization based on a rhetoric of corruption in the political class, economic performance (Babiš's 'running the state like a company') and technocracy (Slačálek 2021, 163).

Vondruška enriches this concept of Central European anti-ideological and anti-elite populism with a scientific and historical mythology that explains it, gives it a global and historical context and a semblance of credibility. In the novel, this effect is achieved through the form of a family saga. Several generations of the Wagner family travel around the world, and from the fragments of their perspectives the reader pieces together a certain 'state of the world'. Whether teaching gender studies at Italian universities, doing a doctorate in the USA or conducting biological research in entomology in Germany, the various Wagners and their contemporaries compare their experiences with those of Central Europe and bring back news of the gradual decline of the world and the elite's detachment from reality. Even the Faculty of Philosophy at Prague's Charles University, under pressure from the fictional Society of Correct Europeans and European Women, becomes an ordinary Western institution, more interested in moral appeals than in the knowledge of truth.

As in his essays, Vondruška uses historical metaphor to describe the current political, social and cultural situation and to warn of the consequences of the current direction. Central to this is the figure of the sociologist Adam Wagner – Vondruška's alter

ego – an ostracised intellectual who is able to predict the direction of history on the basis of historical parallels. In the narrative, this point is particularly reinforced by the fact that Wagner spends the entire first half of the book predicting events that have actually happened despite the efforts of liberal elites (such as the first election of Donald Trump as US president). This narrative technique then makes the other catastrophic predictions seem plausible and even inevitable. When Wagner claims that "just as Rome has become a gilded bubble without power and influence, so too will Brussels" (Vondruška 2019, chap. 7), this is not mere conjecture, but a 'scientifically' confirmed prediction that will come true, just like everything else Adam Wagner has predicted.

A key turning point – analogous to the fall of the Roman Empire – Is the question of 'barbarians' – this time immigrants from the Middle East. Vondruška has often touched on the sensitive moment of the so-called refugee crisis, the quotas for their admission and the question of morality associated with the admission of refugees. Although most of the Czech political scene operates on Islamophobic premises to some extent – not only former president Miloš Zeman, but also the conservative right and the populists – Vondruška's essays and novel are not overtly racist in the sense of a theory of racial or cultural superiority. While Kundera's idea of Central Europe is based on national and cultural plurality, for Vondruška cultural isolationism and the notion of the incompatibility of cultures are key. For Vondruška, the relative national homogeneity of Czech society is its main advantage. This is also why the Czechs are able to resist the invasion of Muslim armies at the end of the novel, which (similarly to Houellebecq's fantasy) dominate Western Europe due to their higher natality and greater will to power compared to the decadent Western population. The new Europe will then be built (after the triumph of the

Czech armies under the Wagner family) on new foundations, devoid of ideology and based on the pragmatism of much smaller, nationally defined groups.

Vonduška devotes considerable space to the question of the morality of this isolationism and pragmatism, and we can read his novel as an attempt to prove that any form of interventionism will ultimately backfire on its actors. Anyone who tries to help refugees (from Bosnia, Syria and later elsewhere) will only tip the balance further away from healthy pragmatism. Even the most optimistic characters understand by the end of the novel that letting refugees into Europe, despite good intentions, means destruction, and even giving food to starving children only leads to more dependency and more waves of migration. For him, pragmatism means seeing through this moral trap and taking a firm grip on power.

The same pragmatic, anti-elitist stance applies to culture. Whereas Kundera sees high culture as a sign of Central Europe, as its special feature, which the West has abandoned in favour of consumerism and whose importance it has forgotten, Vondruška sees modern art as just another symbol of decadence. Long passages mocking modern art and (fictitious) committed drama directed against Miloš Zeman contrast with the enthusiasm for the faux medieval folk art practised by members of the Wagner family in their prepperian fortress, which reflects the feudal order of society. Against the nihilism and elitism of modern art, he juxtaposes amusement and directness – a kind of vindication of Vondruška's work as such, which critics have ignored at best and ridiculed at worst. But Vondruška and populist centrist politicians are not the only declinists here. For Kundera (but also for Havel in the 1970s), the West is also in decline:

That's why in Central European revolts there is something conservative, nearly anachronistic: they are desperately trying to restore the past, the past of culture, the past of the modern era. It is only in that period, only in a world that maintains a cultural dimension, that Central Europe can still defend its identity, still be seen for what it is. The real tragedy for Central Europe, then, is not Russia but Europe: this Europe that represented a value so great that the director of the Hungarian News Agency was ready to die for it, and for which he did indeed die. Behind the iron curtain, he did not suspect that the times had changed and that in Europe itself Europe was no longer experienced as a value. He did not suspect that the sentence he was sending by telex beyond the borders of his flat country would seem outmoded and would not be understood (Kundera 2023, 58).

The difference, of course, is that in Vondruška's eyes the value that Europe represents is nothing but an illusion. It is a deceptive idea that something can transcend its values on the basis of culture alone, because history teaches us that there is only power and the will to power. Everything else is just a feudal, communist or capitalist facade. While Kundera sees Russia as a threat to the very character of Central Europe ("How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space?" Kundera 2023, 37), for Vondruška it is only doing what everyone else does – using its power to control others. For Vondruška, the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia is not a Central European tragedy, but just another change of ruling elites. Through this lens, Moscow is no better or worse than Brussels. The problem with modern Europe is therefore not that it has forgotten its common values, but rather that its individual national identities need to be restored, because history inevitably punishes any form of idealism. Central Europeans should not yearn to become part of the imagined West again, but they must see through this illusion and fight pragmatically for their own version of the past, present and future.

Conclusion

Vondruška's novel is emblematic of a broader political change and the advent of new populist-nationalist and/or conservative parties in Central Europe, including the Czech centrist populists. The novel's primary focus is the retelling of recent history through the lens of the schism between the elite and the people, the nation and 'Brussels'. In contrast to the return to Europe observed by the liberal consensus as a 'normal' state of Central Europe after the 1989 revolution,[3] the novel depicts the West in a state of sharp moral decline and the Czech return to Europe is framed as mere game of domestic and international elites. In the near future, Central Europe, described by liberal critics as a 'pupil' of the developed West, can now become a teacher and demonstrate the limitations of ideologies such as multiculturalism and moral liberalism, which stand in opposition to the unchangeable rules of nature and history.

What Kundera once understood as the kidnapped West characterised by its complex ethnic and cultural mix, is understood in this narrative as a state (or even more explicitly as an ethnicity or culture) that is lost in the West, where it does not belong (both ethnically and culturally) and where it is forced to feel and act as an inferior entity. The solution to this problem in the novel is not a balanced development but a return to former glories, isolationism and the time-honoured values of an imaginary Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to entirely disregard Vondruškas's anti-elitism, medievalism and anti-Western sentiments. We can read them also as a critique of alienation in the age of global capitalism. His *Chronicle* is not merely a literary

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[3] Some described the repeated victory of Czech president Miloš Zeman as a 'teenage rebellion' against the West that had been until this point looked up to.

manifestation of an inferiority complex; it is also a voice that yearns for *gemeinschaft* over *gesellschaft*, drawing upon the long tradition of anticivilizational utopias. The manor of the Wagner Family, which represents the last bastion of Western civilisation against the Muslim army, can be seen as just another example of the fictional refugees of modern man attempting to unite with nature (both human nature and the natural environment). When viewed in this broader context, it can be argued that it is only marginally different from Kundera's imagined Central Europe of small multicultural states with a penchant for high culture and Western values. It only represents its anti-elitist mirror image.

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Being East European (from a Polish perspective)

Response to Stefan Segi

My response concerned a paper on the work of the Czech writer Vlastimil Vondruška and the discourse of 'political correctness'. In my response, I tried to outline how the concept of political correctness was used in Polish political novels written by right-wing writers and journalists (Bronislaw Wildstein, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Paweł Lisicki). I'm trying to compare the Czech situation with the Polish one, because here one can find many right-wing populist political novels. Perhaps even the majority of Polish political novels written since 1989 can be labelled this way.

This raises the question: how can we read such a novel? I feel that there are basically two approaches to a work of art – literary or visual – one could call them: 'exegetical' or 'critical'. So, one can either hermeneutically explicate texts and build contexts, or - one can read against the text, looking for inconsistencies and blind spots. How, then, to read right-wing/conservative historical or contemporary novels? The question is all the more relevant as there are also, as I mentioned above, quite a few right-wing political novels in Polish literature since 1989. The authors are often right-wing publicists and figures of power, such as Bronisław Wildstein, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Paweł Lisicki and others. They tend to follow a similar pattern – a concern for the endangered Polish, male and Catholic identity. Of course, a great deal changed here

in 2015, i.e. the so-called refugee crisis from Middle Eastern countries (which overlapped with the double elections in Poland – presidential and parliamentary). And here the issue of Islam clearly emerged – in public discourse as well as in novels (and journalism).

If we want to read more critically than exegetically, it would be good to look for a framework, a socio-political framework. So, one can ask the question: what is 'political correctness'? Today, for me, this concept is a bit historical, as if it has disappeared from the Polish public discourse (it appeared 'woke' instead); but for a long time, it was present. What does the term mean? Whose political vocabulary does it belong to? At least in Poland – to the dictionary of the Polish right wing. And it was created by American conservatives and was supposedly meant to defend the rights of minorities. Again - at least in Poland, this has never been the case. It seems that the concept of political correctness cannot be well understood without the notion of cultural hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), which translates into political power. It is worth remembering that the notion of hegemony does not simply mean the strongest subject or actor in the political field, but rather the one who is able to define this field and at the same time draw dividing lines that will apply to all (*divide et impera*).

In Poland, when the concept of 'political correctness' was used, LGBT marches were thrown with stones, banned by the mayor of Warsaw, etc. So it was a concept that enabled the right to attack minorities or the emancipation of women. This was part of neoconservative rhetoric. Perhaps, then, the concept of political correctness should be understood literally – as actions in line with the dominant political power. In Poland in the 2000s, it would therefore be the 'John Paul II generation'. A phenomenon created by publicists and completely in line with the ideas of the right-wing conservative ruling party of the time. And in that sense, it was *literally* 'politically correct'.

There is also a contradiction in Vondruška's work – he complains about the omnipresent censorship but writes about it in books that are immensely popular with readers. A separate issue will be the anti-Muslim discourse and the inseparably connected vision of Europe. Islamophobia in Europe can take many forms – including liberal-progressive and also feminist. But there is also an anti-Muslim discourse from the right (in Poland mostly religious and this may be the difference between Poland and the Czech Republic). Monika Bobako, a Polish philosopher and author of the book *Islamobobia jako technologia władzy* [*Islamophobia as a technology of power. A study in political anthropology*] uses the term 'Islamophobia of resentment' in this context. In these approaches, Europe is synonymous with secular modernity (and the key ideals of individual autonomy and freedom) and which is the opposite of the 'Islamic world' (understood as the domain of non-modern or anti-modern values). Bobako writes:

> Besieged by the secularized culture of individualism and moral permissiveness of the West, the preachers of conservative Christian Islamophobia thus fight against Islam, which, while being in their perception the enemy of Christianity, at the same time symbolizes what they consider to be their goal and their greatest value: the return of a society subordinated to religious principles (Bobako 2017, 316).

And another thesis of hers: the specificity of the Polish variant of this discourse is closely related to the fact of Poland's semi-peripheral location, i.e. within 'Eastern or Central Europe'. This issue is discussed by influential Polish literary critic Przemysław Czapliński in his recent book *Poruszona mapa*: *wyobraźnia geograficzno-kulturowa polskiej literatury przełomu XX I XXI wieku* (2016) [*Displaced map. The Geographical and Cultural Imagination of Polish Literature at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Century*]. He titles the first chapter of his monograph in a very characteristic way: *The East, or the Dirt of Europe* and gives the motto from Wolfgang Buscher's book – "The East is something nobody wants. What everyone shrugs off from his coat as if a bird had

nibbled on his sleeve. The label of East is passed on - to the East" (Czapliński 2016, 12).

And that's why – in short – 'Central Europe' was born. The concept of 'Eastern Europe', too, was once created. This is described by Larry Woolf in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1995), which recently was translated into Polish (2020), almost two decades since its first edition in English. Woolf claims it was the French Enlightenment that shifted the coordinates, from a north-south axis to an east-west one. So, earlier, Poland was supposed to belong to the 'barbaric north' and was – In short – the better option than to 'Eastern Europe'. Much earlier, influential Polish literary historian Maria Janion wrote very similarly on this subject in her 1972 book *Romantyzm, rewolucja, marksizm. Colloqia gdańskie* [*Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism. The quolloqia in Gdańsk*]. Unfortunately, Woolf knew nothing about this and does not mention Janion's conceptualization in his book. Even though he was writing about 'Eastern Europe' (and Poland).

This (semi)peripheral location of Poland is often combined with a feeling of not being quite in Europe, not quite European. And sometimes – paradoxically – racism/Islamophobia can be a (horrible) way of joining Europe and being a 'true European'. This strange logic is described by Monika Bobako.

After accession to the European Union, one might have thought that this way of thinking and affects would disappear – but it did not. Case in point – Ivan Kalmar's very interesting and challenging book *White But Not Quite. Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt.* He uses not so much the notion of 'race' (in relation to Central Europe), but of racialization of the people from the region. And the region is precisely Central Europe

(Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) – and the reaction to the neoliberal economic transformation after 1989.

And this would be the framework for analyzing right-wing political novels from Poland (and Central and Eastern Europe). In the most general terms, they give wrong answers to well-asked questions. This is because these narratives are based on a strong national identity and scapegoating of its enemies. There is almost always a scapegoat in a Girardian sense (LGBTQ people, feminists, or Muslim immigrants).

Therefore, a much better response and reaction to the economic transformation seems to me to be other novels. In Poland, especially Dorota Masłowska's novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (2003), translated as *Snow White and Russian Red* by Benjamin Paloff. The main protagonist is a young boy – very frustrated, very aggressive and very stoned, with no knowledge of foreign languages, an inhabitant of the Polish periphery. He meets a series of girlfriends who represent different political languages (conservatism, feminism, environmentalism), which are immediately parodied. For here the political has become the language itself - and therefore the slang spoken by the main character. The novel reveals complexes and frustrations more than it looks for enemies and scapegoats. This is why I think it is one of the best political novels in Poland since 1989.

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