Blazek M, Suska P.

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Towards dialogic post-socialism: Relational geographies of Europe and the notion of community in urban activism in Bratislava

Matej Blazek, Newcastle University, matej.blazek@ncl.ac.uk (*Correspondence author*)

Pavel Šuška, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Pavel.Suska@savba.sk

Abstract

This paper seeks to reinvigorate post-socialism as an analytical tool for addressing the changing geographies of Europe, particularly the differences across 'the East' and 'the West'. We argue for departure from the dialectic understandings of post-socialism and propose a 'dialogic' approach that would resist teleology and closure, and promote ontological openness and spatio-temporal contingency. We illustrate this argument by tracing the different attitudes to the idea of community in Western and Eastern Europe. The notion of community has been largely absent in formal as well as everyday politics in Eastern Europe. The paper interrogates the reasons behind this absence and then tracks the recent emergence of community among urban activists in Bratislava (Slovakia) as a case study. We suggest that while the links between the West and the East are important for this emergence, it cannot be explained simply in terms of convergence towards the West. Instead, manifold geographical and historical connections are fundamental for the formation of diverse and often contradictory ways in which the notion of community underpins activist initiatives. Pointing towards the relational composition of post-socialist processes, dialogic approach offers a more robust relational approach to the contemporary geographies of Europe.

Highlights

- The paper reinvigorates post-socialism as a conceptual tool for addressing relational geographies of
- It proposes a dialogic approach, based on contingency, ontological openness and rejection of teleology and essentialism
- This is illustrated in a critical discourse analysis of urban activism in Bratislava, Slovakia
- The notion of community has been absent in Eastern European politics but begins to be deployed through a myriad of relations
- The analysis warns against essentialising the emerging discourses between Eastern and Western Europe

Introduction

Some 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, 'Western' and 'Eastern' Europe have seemingly merged into one unit. As a result, the popularity of post-socialism as a conceptual tool and marker of difference is fading. Yet, numerous striking differences across the West-East axis of Europe have surfaced, including tensions and contrasting attitudes between Eastern and Western Europe towards issues such as the Refugee Crisis in 2015 (Ágh, 2016; Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier, 2016), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Klinke, 2015a; Loftus and Kanet, 2015), LGBTQ rights (Binnie, 2014; Pitoňák and Špilková, 2016), and intra-EU migration (Careja, 2016; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016).

This paper seeks to reinvigorate post-socialism as an analytic tool for addressing these new cultural and political geographies of Europe. We object to those who have proclaimed 'the end of post-socialism' (Ferenčuhová, 2011), and suggest approaches to temporality and spatiality that carefully attend to diversity across the West-East axis of Europe, as well as within these regions in times when such differences are gaining new geopolitical importance. To achieve this, we suggest that the existing academic focus on economic inequalities and academic production of knowledge under post-socialism, needs to incorporate the production and mobilisation of knowledge from a range of everyday domains. Consequently, we argue that the prevalent *dialectic* notion of post-socialism needs to be replaced by a *dialogic* (following Sennett, 2012) one, that resists resolution, closure and fixed ontology.

This argument is exemplified through a critical discourse analysis of the ways in which the notion of community has recently been mobilised in urban activism¹ in Bratislava, Slovakia. This empirical material is placed within a wider narrative in which we track how community has (or has not) been deployed in post-socialist politics. While the notion of community is an important concept in politics

¹ We use the term activism in a loose manner, and apply it to non-state activities that seek to bring about change. Their scope can range from a local neighbourhood to tackling global issues. As such, the participants in the projects we analyse might not necessarily identify themselves as activists.

and governance in the West (Young, 1986; Rose, 1996; Joseph, 2002; Day, 2006; Delanty, 2010), it has attracted less attention in Eastern European political discourses. Now, with its gradual deployment in that region, we track the importance of commonalities, links, but also dissonances and tensions between discursive politics in the West and the East. We conclude that similarities and differences between these two regions can be explained by neither a 'transition' of the East towards mimicking the West, nor by essentialist discourses of cultural and political difference. Instead, we find that the political field in which the concept of community is appropriated and mobilised, is produced through a range of interplays between factors from various spatio-temporal domains and scales.

We begin this paper by articulating a critique of the dominant dialectic approaches to post-socialism and by formulating an alternative, dialogic perspective. We then apply this dialogic approach to the discussion of the dismissive attitudes that are expressed towards the notion of community in Eastern Europe. This wider critical review is then supplemented with a case study that offers a critical discourse analysis of the deployment of community in contemporary urban activism in Bratislava.

Towards dialogic post-socialism

Post-socialism was initially introduced as a *temporary* project. Neoliberal (Sachs, 1994; Åslund, 2002) and neoconservative (McFaul, 1993) approaches that dominated early debates, highlighted institutional transitions and a reduction in diverse developments in East and Central Europe (ECE) to being different stages of the wider project of global liberal capitalism. Emphasising political-economic perspectives, media and policy establishments in *both* Western and Eastern Europe have promoted a narrative in which 'all roads lead to the West' (True, 2003, p. 1). This position suggested that the difference between the regions is of degree (of transition) rather than kind, and post-socialism is then reduced to a transitional concept of convergence towards liberal capitalism. The emerging social scientific critique (e.g. Verdery, 1996; Bridger and Pine, 1998; Hann, 2002) countered this teleological notion of difference and emphasised the importance of lived experiences

and inequalities. Yet, only a few authors (Hörschelmann, 2002; Stenning, 2005a) have problematized the transient nature of post-socialism. The chief conceptualisation of post-socialism evolved from dialectic understandings of change, in which remnants of socialist infrastructure interacted with their antagonistic responses, producing (even if through diverse routes) cohesive and ‘maturing’ economic, political, social, and cultural orderings, resembling and catching up with their counterparts in the West (see Smith and Pickles, 1998, for a more detailed statement and critique of transitional approaches).

The idea of post-socialism has lost in prominence as the institutional transitions meant to bring ECE closer to the West have largely been accomplished (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2006; Pickles, 2010). However, these institutional transitions have not only seemingly brought the East and the West closer together, they have also accelerated mobilities (Burrell, 2009; Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2014) and economic and cultural engagement across the EU (Matejskova, 2013; Gawlewicz, 2015). Yet, some striking differences across Europe persevere while new differences have emerged. Economic disparities within the EU have featured prominently in policy and media debates (Hörschelmann and van Hoven, 2003; Marksoo et al., 2010; Pittau *et al.*, 2010;), but a rise and reinforcement of contradictions in social and cultural identities and politics has also taken place (Sellar and McEwen, 2011; Moisio *et al.*, 2013). The ‘culture of survival’ (Bridger and Pine, 1998), declared as a defining but *temporary* feature of the earlier stages of post-socialist transitions, is nowadays recognised by the poor in the East as a *permanent* facet of the post-socialist condition, attached to neoliberal reforms and macroeconomic policies, many of which have been inspired and pushed to the fore by Western institutions (Bohle, 2006; Stenning et al., 2010). In turn, this has triggered resentment in the East towards the geopolitical order represented by the EU and other Western institutions (de Vries, 2013; Polyakova and Fligstein, 2016). As we suggested in the introduction, responses to some of the key recent events in Europe indicate an emerging drift apart between the West and the East, and gives us cause to investigate whether ECE can be viewed as part of ‘an unproblematized [concept of] “Europe”’ (Stenning 2005b: 381; also Klinke, 2015b).

Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008) argue that, with the focus on North-South relations in critical academic debates, lesser attention has been given to ECE, including some of the most 'marginal spaces [...] *within* Europe' (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008, p. 315). We contend that it is time to again focus on differences across Europe and that a (re-)new(ed) conceptual basis is needed that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism, whether in seeing the West and the East as birds of a feather or as polar opposites. We view such a basis as still being grounded in the concept of post-socialism, but moving away from dialectical views of transition. First, it is imperative that thinking through post-socialism reflects social experiences in Eastern Europe as relational across manifold geographical and historical links, not viewed as isolated and existing on their own (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). Studying the West or the East has to recognise their *inter*- and *intra*-relations, as well as the academic context from which this scholarship emerges (Klinke, 2015b). Second, while there is a need to decouple post-socialism from the grand transitional narratives originated in the West, its reconstruction must not neglect the impacts of major institutional forces, especially the EU (Clark and Jones, 2008). Such reflections will require identifying the interplay of these macro-institutions with non-institutional elements, such as embodied mobilities (Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2014), new and emerging notions of difference (Flemming, 2012), popular culture (Moisio *et al.*, 2013), multiculturalism (Matejskova, 2013), and historical legacies of nationalism (Young and Light, 2001). Third, much more consideration must be given to the comparative geographies of knowledge production and mobilisation *between* and *within* the West and the East. By this, we do not only mean critical reflections of the academic production of knowledge about the East, that have been repeatedly enunciated (Timár 2004; Domański, 2004; Hörschelmann and Stenning, 2008; Ferenčuhová, 2016). Rather, such a critique has to be developed hand in hand with insights into the wider geographies of knowledge. Both Domański (2004) and Timár (2004) have suggested that with the overwhelming focus on economic disparities between the West and the East, less attention has been given to the cultural marginalisation of ECE. Critical insight into the geographies of knowledge production and mobilisation within and *beyond* academia is thus central to understanding the

positioning and role of such marginalisation in the shaping of new geographies of Europe (Pickles, 2005; Moisio *et al.*, 2013). We therefore assert that more attention needs to be given to the impacts of various power geometries on the politics of *knowledge* in all areas and scales of the social life, including but certainly *not restricted* to academic or other forms of institutional forms of knowledge. As highlighted by Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008), post-1989 processes in ECE *can* be read (and *are* read by some) through the lens of decolonisation and neo-colonisation, as countries of ECE, ‘having extracted themselves from the Soviet Empire, [...] find themselves part of neo-colonial discourses of globalization and Europeanization’ (p. 324). Crucially, here we can see the importance of a relational reading of the emerging discursive formations in ECE, that resist the ‘objectification and essentialization’ (Kuus, 2004, p.483) of the East and of post-socialism. Such a reading has to be situated in the context of de/neo-colonial power dynamics – of reconciliations with the socialist past, whether through anti-communist counter-narratives or through a nostalgic renaissance and reconstruction of socialism (e.g. Czepczynsky, 2008); and of the impact of global economic and political agendas of the ‘western’ institutions, such as EU, NATO, IMF and the World Bank (Kuus, 2004) – but it cannot be reduced to them.

Our ensuing conceptual proposition is to move away from the dominant *dialectic* notion of post-socialism towards a *dialogic* one. Following Sennett (2012), we understand the dialectic approach as departing from the holistic socio-political condition of the socialist past that is contested and penetrated by its liberal-capitalist contradictions. Dialectic thinking dissolves socialism into complex institutional and socio-cultural transformations, so the post-socialist transition can be read as a *reaction* to the past. The past gradually ceases to matter and becomes submerged in the dialectic process in which a new condition is formed and formulated. The identity of such new constellations is distinctively different from the past, eradicating the singularity of socialism at some point. As socialism is no longer present, post-socialism is no longer relevant. In contrast, Sennett (2012) builds on Bakhtin (1986) to formulate the idea of *dialogism* which offers no resolution, fixation or closure, and problematizes binary relations that often envelope narratives about post-socialism, such as the

source and the response, the good and the bad, or the dominant and the marginal. Bakhtin suggests that past meanings 'can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue' (Bakhtin 1986, p.170). A dialogic approach to post-socialism is thus characterised by a radical ontological openness in which no single solution takes primacy. It is constructed in a dialogue with *various* pasts, presents and (envisioned, anticipated, planned, and evolving) futures, and formed by a multiplicity of geographical connections that can never formulate a steady holistic identity. Dialogic post-socialism rejects teleology: socialist pasts might or might not matter in particular constellations, and if they do, it may be in a variety of ways. The past may act as a legacy of ideology and institutional systems – along the lines of the dominant interpretations of post-socialism – but also as the built environment (Bouzarovski et al., 2011), art (Svašek, 2002), artefacts (Burrell, 2011), memory (Young and Kaczmarek, 2008), habits (Light and Young, 2014), everyday legacies of economic practices (Coe et al., 2008) or consumption patterns (Smith and Jehlicka, 2007). Post-socialism emerges in the sense of plurality – various site-specific 'post-socialisms' rather than a single order.

To illustrate the dialogical approach to post-socialism, this paper now focuses on the ways in which the notion of community has been relegated and more recently revived in the political discourses of the ECE. The discursive deployment of community is chosen here as an example of relational historical geographies of knowledge production, circulation and mobilisation. It serves as a contemporary instance of an apparent contrast between the West and the East, but also illustrates how these contrasts are site-specific effects of interplays between various temporalities and spatialities across Europe, rather than manifestations of fundamental difference between the regions.

Community has played an important role in Western politics but the concept is rarely deployed in Eastern Europe. We suggest that the demotion of the term in ECE cannot simply be explained as a legacy of the centralist state-communist political organisation and its penetration into the everyday

lives of its citizens – a sweeping interpretation that portrays the East as ‘Other’ to the West. Neither can its re-emergence in urban activism be solely interpreted as a sign of convergence towards Western politics. Instead, there are multiple roots for the disappearance and re-appearance of the notion of community in the East, originating from a number of sometimes conflicting and often contingent spatial and temporal constellations, some of which pre-date the socialist period and none of which offer any fixed resolution.

Post-socialist politics and the notion of community

Watts (2004) proclaims community to be ‘a fundamental modality for the conduct of modern politics’ (p.195) in the West. This does not mean that there is a single view of what community stands for or what political potential it has. While Etzioni (1995) advocates for a sense of community as a response to individualisation and neoliberalism, Bauman (2001) suggests that the pursuit of community for coping with insecurity, often brings along with it the worst aspects of exclusion and violence. Where some critics of globalisation are sceptical about the political capital of community in dealing with wider issues of global neoliberalism (Harvey, 1989), other voices promote communities through an open sense of place and interconnectedness (Massey, 1994). The idea of community as a cornerstone of democracy and instrument of social justice has been celebrated (Nalbandian, 1999; Dionne, 2000; Friedland, 2001), but Young (1986) rejects the notion of community ‘as an alternative to the oppression and exploitation’ (p.1) and points to its exclusionary character because it ‘devalues and denies difference’ (p.2). Joseph (2002) likewise problematises the idea of community as a device of inclusion and an alternative to capitalist relations, arguing that ‘communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption’ and therefore ‘capitalism... depend[s] on and generate[s] the discourse of community to legitimate social hierarchies’ (p. viii). Rather than viewing the politics of community in contrast to state governance, Rose (1996) suggests that the notion of community has been formalised and transformed into governmental discourses and practices as a tool of public administration. Finally, Sihlongonyane

(2009) argues that the very notion of community is being, in some instances, deployed as a popular buzzword rather than insightful concept.

It is neither our intention to assess the merit of these perspectives nor promote particular conceptions of community as political goals for the East. Rather, we seek to point out that whether seen as promising or critiqued as reactionary, community *is* at the heart of political discourses in the West, while it is not in the East. Mainstream party politics in post-socialist Eastern Europe has been dominated by a blend of centralist populism and pro-individual neoliberalism, both of which feature elusive and ill-defined attitudes towards community politics (Carpenter, 1997; Kostelecký, 2002).

The concept is likewise absent in everyday political discourses. In an example from Slovakia, Moodie *et al.* (1997) suggest that community is seen 'as something meaningless and negative' (p.36), associated with 'the state apparatus for the control of individuals' (p.35). Drawing on Arendt's (1967) work on totalitarianism, they declare that the communist regime destroyed 'local attachments and loyalties' (Moodie *et al.*, 1997, p.35) and thus erased the notion of community from political discourses.

We believe that placing the responsibility for the erasure of community from political discourses solely on the state-sanctioned Marxian version of collectivism, has serious limitations. While the communist states were instrumental in dismantling informal collective ties, the weakening of the idea of community is far too complex to be swept aside as an effect of totalitarianism, and has to be further scrutinised in order to understand its contemporary absence and re-emergence. We suggest that, at minimum, the following elements have contributed: a lack of horizontal social movements and informal ties; the cultural legacy of the pre-socialist past and impacts of neoliberalism; and specific forms of nationalism. Together, they represent links and relations spanning temporalities beyond the Soviet era and spatialities at a range of scales.

Local ties and vertical politics

Smith (2003) suggests that the formation of local ties in the earlier post-socialist period was driven primarily by the institutionalisation of the existing political capital, especially through the co-involvement of local civic leaders and the emerging third sector. The orientation towards local elites and formal structures is then seen by many, as a key issue behind the absence of community politics. Gorlach and Mooney (1998) have argued that, with the exception of the role of the peasant and trade union struggles in Poland, decentralised local activism played a fairly marginal role in the anti-communist resistance, as political dissent was driven by individual leaders from amongst artists, church leaders and environmentalists (Weigel, 1992; Sarre and Jehlička, 2007; Bolton, 2012). This legacy of late state socialism led to post-socialist informal politics developing through vertical rather than horizontal ties. Petrova and Tarrow (2007) and Císař (2010) describe how the region is nowadays characteristic by a 'weak' and 'under-developed' potential for collective action. Instead, they assert that it has established functional structures of what they call 'transactional' activism. 'Transactional' refers to the potential vested in the links 'among organized non-state actors and between them and political parties, power holders and other institutions' (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007, p.79), as opposed to capacities embedded in the mobilisation of individuals to 'aggregate individual contributions' (Císař, 2010, p.740). The reasons behind these developments vary: from the suspicion and hostility towards civic activism as a Western import (Fabian, 2010), to the right-wing liberals' celebration of leadership and individual achievements as the antithesis to the supposed collectivist legacy of socialism (Slosiarik, 2003). Either way, the lack of collective mobilisation in social movements took away what Castells (1996) identified as a potential spark in the formation of community politics, as the shared experiences, meanings and affirmations of identity have not had the opportunity to materialise during the course of mass political action. Some authors (Stenning, 2005c; Hardy *et al.*, 2008) have expressed hopes for the reconstruction of community as a political project of the working class and other marginalised groups, but there is little evidence to suggest this has been happening. Mrozowicki *et al.* (2010) on the contrary suggest that although unionism has been revitalised in parts of ECE in terms of membership growth, union reforms and improved

links with other stakeholders, its prospects for moving away from transactional politics to become a seed for developing wider community bonds are limited, because of the generally declining role of industrial workers and the focus of trade unions 'too centred on the reality of [the] workplace' (Mrozowicki *et al.*, 2010, p.235-236).

Pre-socialist conservatism and post-socialist neoliberalism

Green (1998) argues that a sense of community *can* actually be identified in some post-socialist regions, especially in rural areas, but it is defined exclusively as a birth trait. Such rural and semi-rural identities have been largely circumscribed by family affiliation, social status, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and gender, rather than based on voluntary involvement in communal affairs. Such a conservatively normative perception of collective identity has endured from the pre-communist period and, according to some (e.g., Mudde, 2000; Skalník, 2009), it continues to impact on the development of mainstream and everyday politics across ECE. It does, by its nature, inhibit the formation of community as a form of civic participation and exhibits signs of reactionary politics that denies difference (Young, 1986).

Many authors also argue that it is the economic legacy of the socialist and pre-socialist era, that best explains the different paths in which senses of collective identity and politics have been shaped in the East and the West. While largely illegal, informal economic activities performed by individuals and their families, endured and were crucial to securing wellbeing during socialism (Bridger and Pine, 1998). Drawing on research in Romania, Stewart (1998) suggests that individualism was the *actual* culture of survival during socialism there, and it is as such directly linked with neoliberal subjectivities of post-socialism. The work of Stenning *et al.* (2010) in Poland and Slovakia then illustrates how the present individualistic subject of post-socialist societies, has been simultaneously co-produced by the 'domestication' of neoliberalism 'imported' from the West *and* the sedimented socio-economic relations of the socialist past. Such constellations gave political prominence to two subjects: individuals and households.

Hörschelmann (2004) rightly claims that post-socialism cannot be reduced to neoliberalism, but individualism, competitiveness and detachment have been identified as significant formative features of post-socialist societies (Czepczynsky, 2008; Stenning *et al.*, 2010). Despite some cautious optimism when referring to the potential of labour movements to challenge the culture and politics of individualism (Stenning, 2003), prioritising oneself and one's family is viewed as being particularly resonant among the younger generations (Roberts, 2008). Guiding everyday social and economic practices in keeping with the interests of individuals and their families (Stenning *et al.*, 2010), thus works in direct contradiction with the idea of community as a collective transformative project (Calhoun, 1982). Along with individuals, household emerged as a central subject of post-socialist transformations (e.g., Smith, 2002; Pavlovskaya, 2004; Stenning *et al.*, 2010). Rising to prominence as an economic and cultural unit and bridging the nuclear-family tradition of pre-socialism with capitalist individualism, its significance has had impeding effects on the establishment of wider societal links. Fabián (2010) for instance, suggests that the glorification of family in post-socialist politics has led to the acceptance of pathologies such as domestic violence as private matters that should be dealt with outside the scope of state or community interventions. Elsewhere, Smith and Stenning (2006) argue that the central role of household has led to the reaffirmation of gendered power geometries that reproduce social and economic inequalities. Centred around individuals and their familial environment, the cultural and political influence of neoliberalism has posed a substantial challenge to the evolution of the idea of community in everyday politics.

Nationalism

The literature on nationalism presents a dichotomy in which Eastern European countries are associated with ethnic and Western European with civic forms of nationalism (Özkirimli, 2010). This argument is often situated in the narrative of decolonisation and territorial liberation. Brubaker (1996), for instance, describes ethno-nationalist ideologies as central to the range of socio-economic

struggles in ECE that started with the contestations of the Austria-Hungarian Empire in the 19th Century and continued until the fall of the Iron Curtain. Elsewhere, Szabo (1994) suggests that the disentanglement of ECE countries from the Soviet Union and their establishment of new political identities were underpinned by narratives of the 'reaffirmation and resurrection of national unity, national traditions, national culture, and national interest' (p.377).

Yet, the negative impact of nationalism on the formation of community politics does not only manifest in emphasising a different (larger) scale of belonging. Braumoeller (1997) suggests that nationalism has been a crucial framework through which post-socialist elites have gained wider popular support, emasculating local political initiatives. Schopflin (1996) illustrates that this process was not even specifically new for post-socialist politics, as nationalism was also central to the discursive politics of communist elites in their project of global 'national liberation struggles' against colonial imperialism. Going further back in history, nationalism in ECE before WWII had been intertwined with religious traditionalism that privileged other scales of belonging – family and religious congregation – over voluntary participation in a civic community. Even though some authors (Shulman, 2002) problematize the dichotomy of East/West and ethnic/civic nationalism, they focus on state-led policies rather than cultural practices and constructions of identity. Whereas policies on ethnicity and belonging in ECE might indeed be, in many ways, as open as those in the West – not least because of reforms driven by the EU – there is little evidence that everyday politics and cultural attitudes have been converging in the same manner.

By critically reviewing these points, we do not suggest that a sense of belonging at the communal level or any form of politics of communality is absent in ECE, which is itself a *highly diverse* region. Smith (1999, 2001), for instance analyses detailed examples of neighbourhood collective action in Eastern Germany in the early post-socialist period, that evolved in response to both centralist party politics *and* the economic pressure of neoliberalism. Nor do we insinuate that community is universally held as a central political concept in Western Europe (Herbert, 2005). Rather, we point

out that the historical and geographical contexts that have influenced and shaped the idea of community in Western and Eastern European politics are different, and this difference has to be further recognised in any discursive and material analysis of *contemporary* politics. Whereas community is placed at the heart of Western political discourses, it is rather negligible in the East in comparison to subjects such as individualism, the household or nation. We emphasise the role of history and historical geography not as a way to *essentialise* the present differences between the West and the East in (neo-)colonial terms, but to underline the significance of *dispersed* and *contingent* elements that underpin this differentiation (and similarities), which can only be interpreted through a dialogic perspective with no fixed resolution. To illustrate our argument about the relational geographies of post-socialism further, we now explore the diverse positions that the notion of community has in the urban politics of Bratislava, the Slovak capital. We not only seek to address place-specific reasons behind its insignificance, but also its recent emergence in some initiatives.

Community in Bratislava activism

Bratislava has little political history and tradition based on the idea of community. The term is almost absent from formal policy documents, and the recent exceptions² use the term exclusively in reference to ‘excluded communities’, i.e., areas of high socio-economic deprivation³. While institutions of ‘community work’ and ‘community centres’ have been introduced in a series of national policy documents also relevant to the city⁴, they refer solely to institutionalised interventions supporting ‘reintegration’ in such areas.

² For instance *Plán hospodárskeho a sociálneho rozvoja mestskej časti Ružinov na roky 2014-2020* (*Plan of Economic and Social Development of Ružinov Municipality, 2014-2020*), a planning policy for one of Bratislava’s districts.

³ Some small and local religious congregations also refer to themselves as “komunita”. As this use has developed in a very different context to our study, we do not include it in the analysis.

⁴ For instance *Národný projekt Komunitné centrá* (*National Project for Community Centres*), a governmental programme funded by the European Social Fund; or *Zákon 448/2008 o sociálnych službách* (*Social Services Act*), a piece of legislation articulating the purpose and place of such ‘community work’ in municipality politics.

This absence and the particular context of Bratislava, echo some of the elements of post-socialist changes that we discussed in the previous section, although not all of them. The liberal and West-oriented character of the city has deflected militant forms of nationalism that swept over Slovakia in the 1990s (Carpenter, 1997; Hilde, 1999), and the city is by far the most cosmopolitan area of the country (Blazek, 2014). On the other hand, Bratislava has been exposed to transnational economic flows more than other Slovak regions and its urban landscape and social structures have been strongly affected by neoliberalization and foreign investments (O'Dwyer and Kovalčík, 2007). Bratislava is currently a city of intensifying social stratification (Rochovská *et al.*, 2013), characterised by an expanding housing market, deregulation of public spaces (Buček, 2006; Šuška, 2012), and a political electorate with a particular strong share of high- and mid-income pro-market liberals (Szabó and Tátrai, 2016), advocating for the role of individuals and their families in society. A majority of Bratislava residents live in panel-block housing estates with vast communal and exterior areas, while extensive urban sprawl and suburbanisation have given rise to new residential zones at the periphery occupied by middle and upper class citizens (Šveda, 2016). These urban forms have all been identified as nourishing individualism and alienation: that of an anonymous urban experience in massive high-rise housing estates (Pojani and Buka, 2015) and of a demarcated semi-rural residential experience of sub-urbanisation (Hirt, 2012).

Given the absence of the notion of community in formal politics and general public discourses, our research presents a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the ways in which community has been deployed and mobilised in urban activism. We analysed available public outputs of organisations and projects active in Bratislava that have explicitly referred to the term community in their agenda between 2014 and 2016⁵. To identify relevant initiatives, we conducted an internet search of the terms *komunita* (Slovak word for community) and *Bratislava*, supplemented with our local knowledge of urban activities. Given the limited size of Bratislava (the population of the wider urban

⁵ Where possible, we also studied older documents from these organisations.

area is ca. 550,000), this strategy produced manageable yet comprehensive sets of data (**Table 1**).

Table 1 also reveals the relatively limited typology of ‘community’ projects, indicating perhaps the early and emerging engagement with the term, which has not yet spread to other types of activities and remains concentrated within certain sorts of initiatives. The outputs included project websites, blogs, public statements, interviews, and social media content, especially on Facebook.

TABLE 1: Analysed initiatives

Project title	Characteristics	Main website
<i>Dobry trh</i>	Regular urban market in city centre areas	www.dobrytrh.sk
<i>Pod pyramídou</i>	Café, ‘community garden’ and cultural hub	www.podpyramidou.sk
<i>Mobilné záhrady</i>	Project of ‘mobile gardens’ founded in the inner city	www.vnutroblok.sk
<i>Komunitné záhrady v Bratislave</i>	Facebook portal about community gardening	www.facebook.com/komunitne.zahradyBA
<i>Krasňanský zelovoc</i>	Gardening project in an outskirt neighbourhood	www.krasnanskyzelovoc.sk
<i>Ulita</i>	Community youth work project	www.ulita.sk
<i>Kaspian</i>	Community youth work project	www.kaspian.sk
<i>Mládež ulice</i>	Community youth work project	www.mladezulice.sk
<i>Komunitné centrum Horáreň</i>	Café and cultural centre in a historical building in the largest inner-city park	www.horaren.sk
<i>Komunitné centrum generácií</i>	Community centre with a wider scope	www.utoxia.sk
<i>Zelená záhradka</i>	Gardening project of environmentalist activists	www.zelenahriadka.sk
<i>Komunitná viacgeneračná záhrada ZŠ Sibírska</i>	Gardening project involving a local school and a homeless support charity	www.sibirska.sk
<i>Materské a komunitné centrum – miesto stretnutia generácií, Ovrúčská</i>	Community centre, particularly for families and children.	www.mkc.simove.sk
<i>Živica - Komunitné záhrady</i>	Gardening project of environmentalist activists	www.zivica.sk

CDA is chosen here as a method to demonstrate how interplays of cultural practices, politics and knowledge in this post-socialist area evolve through a variety of relations across time and space. Following Fairclough (1995), our analysis investigates the process through which discourses of community constitute a particular form of action whereby organisations communicate their activities to the wider public. Our focus is therefore not on the ways in which they understand and engage with the concept of community in their everyday praxis (for which interviews or ethnography would be more appropriate methodologies) but rather on how they deploy the term towards wider audience for reasons that might range from appeals to donors to advocacy of a wider subject (e.g. youth work or gardening). Publicity is a performative action that is central to activist praxis (DeLuca, 2009) but we provide only a limited insight into *why* community is deployed strategically in activist

agendas as a discursive device of self-representation or how it underpins activism as a macro- or micro- ideological concept (cf. van Dijk, 1993). Rather, our interest is in the actually conveyed understandings of community – both in terms of explicit meanings and implicit connotations – and in the social and material relations that underpinned the materialisation of these discourses.

In all analysed cases we explored three questions:

- 1) Which explicit or implicit meanings of community do these projects deploy?
- 2) Which aspects of community are present in the discourse and what is their presented role in the praxis?
- 3) What are the spatial and temporal constellations which have enabled the constitution of these discourses?

This framework provides us with firm grounding to investigate how the contemporary discursive practice is formed through relations with historical and geographical elements (social and material), situating particular post-socialist constellations within their connections to both the West and the East of the present and the past. To support our argument about dialogic post-socialism, we now present four types of projects that engage with the notion of community in distinctive ways, exploring the three questions presented above in each. The projects do not represent all discursive mobilisations of community in Bratislava and there is a degree of overlap between, and heterogeneity within, them. This diversity within a single city is a sign that supports the dialogic approach to post-socialism that steers clear from any singular interpretation.

Transforming urban space, establishing community

We now want to focus on [...] a systemic change [...] that will enable [the] establishment of mobile gardens and other projects that create city-forming space for the foundation of neighbourhood communities (i.e., not car parks).⁶

⁶ <http://www.vnutroblok.sk/preco-posledna-zahrada/> (This and all other links were accessed on 6.8.2016).

Dobrý Trh, *Pod Pyramídou* and *Mobilné Záhrady* were all conceived as interventions in the urban space that would produce certain socio-spatial configurations with a potential to forge community relations. Although neither project articulates any explicit sense of community, the quote above, announcing the departure from founding mobile urban gardens towards policy-impacting activities, illustrates three conceptions that underpin their remarkably similar politics. First, these initiatives do not consider communities to actually exist and focus on *establishing* them through activist work. Second, they articulate inexorable links between the spatial and the social and see transformation of urban space as a trigger for community foundation. Third, the spatial intervention is seen to lead towards social change by: a) providing an example of activity; b) establishing bonds between people involved in the project – activists and local residents; and c) equipping volunteers and activists with more experience so they can undertake similar projects elsewhere.

These discourses emphasise urban co-presence and everyday encounters, concepts that have been widely theorised (and challenged) in the context of urban diversity and transformative politics in the West (Wilson, 2016). Echoing some of these debates, one of the project's participants explained:

We presumed that if people had a chance to meet and share space informally, they would communicate and seek ways towards mutual understanding, respect and collaboration to achieve shared goals, solve minor challenges (such as to build a wooden box to grow plants) and big challenges, such as transformation of the urban environment into a more healthy, pleasant and happy place.⁷

Despite the wider focus, local residents are addressed specifically: *Mobilné Záhrady* emphasises the proportion of participants that come from the local neighbourhood⁸; while *Dobrý Trh* addresses 'neighbours' as the key beneficiary group, focusing on how to make the project better able to 'improve the neighbourhood life'⁹. However, the majority of discourse is about space, not people:

⁷ <http://www.podpyramidou.sk/>

⁸ <http://old.vnutroblok.sk/articles/mz2013/mobilne-zahrady-2013.html>

⁹ <http://dobrytrh.sk/mili-susedia>

Dobrý Trh 'enlivens urban public space, opens streets and yards for people, creates place for encounters and experience'¹⁰; *Mobilné Záhrady* criticises the 'lack of care about public space', 'abundance of unused space' and 'non-existing semi-public space' in Bratislava¹¹; and *Pod Pyramídou* describes 'majestic' terraces beneath the Slovak Radio building and seek to turn this 'enclosed and inaccessible space' into an 'inclusive and viable' one¹². The lack of actual communities in Bratislava is attributed to the neglected character of deregulated urban space.

Given the imprint of the socialist period on the urban fabric of central European cities (Light and Young, 2010; Hirt, 2012), the discontent with the urban space articulated by these activists, could be seen as a negation of socialism and the emergence of community as responsive 'post-socialist' politics in the dialectic sense. This is not an entirely accurate statement, however. All three projects concentrate their activities in the central part of the city, whose genesis is more complex than that of panel housing estates. They also contain no explicit critique of the socialist urbanism. They do not see the (legacy of the) socialist city as a problem – as is the case in much academic debates on post-socialist cities (Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012) – but rather as an opportunity. The critique is instead aimed at the contemporary city management and the wider political economy – porous neoliberal governance and urban alienation¹³ – again echoing some Western political discourses foregrounding sense of community as a progressive response to neoliberalism (Cheshire and Lawrence, 2006). Major aspects of post/anti-socialist transformations are thus said to impede the formation of communities.

Another central attribute of post-socialism – East-West mobility (Burrell and Horschelmann, 2014) – has been crucial for the development of these projects. Academic urban theory produced in the West, such as the writings of David Harvey¹⁴, inspiration from creative urban interventions in

¹⁰ <http://dobrytrh.sk/o-trhu>

¹¹ <http://old.vnutroblok.sk/articles/mz2013/mobilne-zahrady-2013.html>

¹² <http://www.podpyramidou.sk/>

¹³ <http://www.vnutroblok.sk/preco-posledna-zahrada/> and <http://old.vnutroblok.sk/articles/mz2013/mobilne-zahrady-2013.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.podpyramidou.sk/>

Western Europe such as pop-up architecture¹⁵, and personal experiences of life and involvement in urban activism in Western European cities such as London and Amsterdam¹⁶, are all mentioned as crucial resources for activists behind these projects. As such, there is some truth to the argument that community as a device of politics, has been ‘imported’ from the West and adapted to specific ‘Eastern’ circumstances.

Environmental gardening

The *Community Gardens* project is focused on the creation of shared space where a newly formed community can undertake activities associated with the growth of food in the urban environment. [...] Primarily, this is about ecological agriculture that respects [the] needs of plants and people for healthy life. On such a sustainable basis, the community will foster cooperation between people who are otherwise isolated. Metaphorically, the project is about filling unused place that receives new meaning and considerable added value.¹⁷

The Facebook webpage called *Komunitné Záhrady v Bratislave* is a campaign and information portal about ‘community gardens’. Promoting the idea of gardening in the city and referring to a number of specific projects, this platform bears similarities with the previous type of activist projects. The quote above refers to the ‘formation’ rather than actual existence of community, it aims to transform ‘unused’ space and it is not associated with a particular locality – activities are placeless in the sense that they can happen anywhere. Like the first type of projects, it has also been inspired by examples and theories from the West, particularly the notion of community as an extension beyond

¹⁵ <http://www.vnutroblok.sk/preco-posledna-zahrada/> and <http://old.vnutroblok.sk/articles/mz2013/mobilne-zahrady-2013.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.sme.sk/c/3670165/fotografka-illah-van-oijen-vidim-to-co-vy-chcete-zabudnut.html>, <http://zena.sme.sk/c/7999348/barbara-zavarska-verejny-priestor-je-pre-ludi.html> or <http://profit.sme.sk/dennik/priroda-v-meste.html>

¹⁷

https://www.facebook.com/komunitne.zahradyBA/info/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info

social ties towards the environment (Okvat and Zautra, 2011)¹⁸, sometimes even replicating existing models such as *Urban AgriCulture Netz Baseli* in Switzerland¹⁹. However, there are distinctions.

First, environmental values are central to the agenda, followed by social and health dimensions.

Environmental gardening specifically mentions issues such as the lack of healthy food, 'dense, desolate and sterile' urban environments, and dependence on fossil fuel in food security, and in turn calls for local production designed to decrease the distance between the producer and consumer²⁰.

Where the previous projects emphasised creativity, vibe and uniqueness, environmental activities place emphasis on tradition and sustainability. Where the former saw community as a way of transforming the city, environmental gardening envisions eco-communities as making a wider impact on the environment (Bowers, 2001).

This also stimulates different discourses of temporality. The projects we previously discussed were directly situated in the city centre and took an ambivalent and opportunistic stance towards socialist urbanism. Their environmentally-focused counterparts usually take place in residential housing estates and their rhetoric situates community gardens in contrast to mass panel-block socialist architecture²¹, critiqued for negative environmental impacts (Temelová et al., 2011). Yet, the critique equally addresses both the capitalist political economy (food production and distribution) and the socialist built environment. Additionally, references to organic agriculture and the symbiosis of nature and society echo images of tradition in pre-socialist (pre-industrial) life in Slovakia, characterised by food self-sufficiency within a household or family (Rochovská and Majo, 2013). Environmental gardens thus bring together the longstanding national tradition of food production, the built environment of socialist estates and the global discourse on eco-friendly ways of living.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/komunitne.zahradyBA/home>

¹⁹ <http://www.zivica.sk/sk/komunitne-zahrady/o-projekte>

²⁰

https://www.facebook.com/komunitne.zahradyBA/info/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info

²¹ <http://www.zivica.sk/sk/komunitne-zahrady/uvod> or <http://profit.sme.sk/dennik/priroda-v-meste.html>

Family groups

The community garden project spoke especially to young families from the apartments in the estate who wanted to grow more ecological food than is available in supermarket chains but lacked the space for it. And so, mummies and daddies together took initiative and today they harvest radish, onion and strawberries from their garden in Rača²² for the first time.²³

This quote refers to a fairly rare example where the word community is employed in a neighbourhood initiative. This project, *Krasňanský Zelovoc*, evolved from a network of people associated with a local family centre called *Ráčik*²⁴. *Ráčik* was initially founded as a volunteering initiative to support families with infants from the area²⁵, but expanded beyond that scope to work with a number of public and cooperative partners, and also offer activities for adults. Yet, the word *family* in *Ráčik*'s title signifies the central focus on pre-school aged children, and even most adult activities (basketball games, exercise, theatre) explicitly target 'parents' of young children.

Another community garden project, *Krasňanský Zelovoc* differs significantly from those discussed before. It is exclusively linked to a particular locality and to interests of the local residents. The needs and goals are also different. While food and time spent together are accentuated, informal education for children is the central element on the agenda ('[w]e are showing to children that a carrot does not grow on the supermarket shelf'²⁶). Unlike the previous projects, *Krasňanský Zelovoc* presents itself as an isolated activity with little

²² A district of Bratislava.

²³ <http://www.krasnanskyzelovoc.sk/krasnansky-zelovoc-je-dalsim-krokom-k-zelensiemu-a-zdravsiemu-prostrediu-v-bratislave/>

²⁴ <http://www.racik.sk/>

²⁵ <http://www.racik.sk/obsah/ako-sme-za%C4%8D%C3%ADnali>

²⁶ <http://www.krasnanskyzelovoc.sk/>

aspirations to affect wider policies or achieve broader social change, and its social scope and inclusiveness are fairly restrictive, with the notions of 'locality' and 'parents/families' repeatedly emphasised²⁷. Where activists in previous projects drew on their often embodied links with Western Europe, *Krasňanský Zelovoc* emphasises local roots and ties. While it was formed in an implicitly middle-class setting, the project's emphasis on family values and homogeneous identity echoes the more traditionalist conceptions of community. Yet, *Krasňanský Zelovoc* makes no reference to other projects or inspirations or more generally to the outside of the neighbourhood, including other projects outside of Slovakia. Community here represents a here-and-now group of people bound by physical locality, demographics and social attributes.

Community youth work practitioners

The final type of initiative we present is based on professional service for children and young people. Youth work projects affiliated with the concept of 'low-threshold programmes'²⁸ employed the word community before any other case analysed group here. *Komunitné Centrum Kopčany* (Kopčany Community Centre)²⁹ was founded in 2004³⁰ as a youth club and detached youth work programme in one of the peripheral neighbourhoods of the city. *Komunitné Centrum Kopčany* and other similar projects (*Kaspian*³¹, *Mládež Ulice*³², *Mixklub*³³) share some of the aspects presented previously, but their way of engaging with the term community is also markedly different in other ways.

²⁷ <http://www.krasnanskyzelovoc.sk/o-nas/>

²⁸ 'Low thresholds' refer to a series of principles in praxis with children and young people, the most important of which are accessibility and availability to anyone, no expectations of regular attendance or fees, and participation of young people in the making of arrangements and rules (<http://nizkoprah.sk/o-nas/>).

²⁹ The first author collaborated with *Komunitné Centrum Kopčany* extensively in the past, in research, consultation but also as a practicing community and youth worker (Blazek, 2016). Our analysis here is restricted only to public outputs of the project and their discursive analysis.

³⁰ <http://ulita.sk/sk/o-nas-ulita/>

³¹ <http://kaspian.sk/o-nas/o-kaspiane/>

³² <http://mladezulice.sk/>

³³ <http://mixklub.sk/mixklub>

Residents with diverse social and cultural backgrounds live here in a small area and there is no lack of conflicts. But there are also strong supportive bonds and when something important happens, almost everyone will know.³⁴

This description of neighbourhood implies several explicit features of community: diverse social composition and a mixture of bonds, antagonism and, most importantly, mutual engagement exemplified by general knowledge of 'when something important happens'. These organisations thus differ by giving a tangible account of real, existing communities (unlike the first two cases we discussed) while defining community beyond a unified sense of identity (like in the third case). Although their focus is on service provision to children and young people, the recipients are actively involved in the identification of problems and needs and in the development and undertaking of solutions, while the role and potential of the locality is embedded in the organisational strategy.

It is important for us that children and young people see their neighbourhood as a pleasant place, and therefore we seek to organise interesting events right here, in Kopčany. Some of the neighbourhood events are seen as a tradition by now, while other are new, often devised with help from young people from the neighbourhood.³⁵

Like projects in the first group, youth workers see the urban space as central to the life of community and approach the neglected semi-public space in peripheral neighbourhoods as an opportunity. However, their activities are grounded in the conception of an *actually existing* community capable of articulating its needs and solutions with appropriate support and facilitation. In other words, ideas about change are extracted from the residents, not imported and offered to them. Space is already a backdrop for everyday activities, an aspect of identity for the actual residents. Like *Dobrý trh* (and unlike, for instance, *Krasňanský Zelovoc*), there is a clear demarcation

³⁴ <http://mladez.sk/2011/11/05/predstavujeme-organizaciu-ulita/>

³⁵ <http://ulita.sk/sk/nase-aktivity/na-sidlisku/>

between 'us' (the practitioners) and 'them' (the community), but the dynamics of interplays between knowledge and praxis are different.

These youth work projects are clearly connected – both locally to one another and to partners from the municipality, donors and other organisations, and also internationally to community and youth work networks such as *Dynamo International*³⁶. This outlines a trajectory of experience and learning which suggests that some ideas on community youth work praxis have been translated from the praxis in the West (Verschelden *et al.*, 2009) and adapted and developed in the local circumstances of Bratislava. Also, while there is no explicit reference to the (socialist) past, youth work programmes emerged during changes in the welfare system in the 1990's, when long-established after-school opportunities were reduced, particularly for children from low-income families (Blazek, 2016). This is then a manifestation of the retreat of state influence without sufficient local ties and dynamics being in place to replace it.

Discussion: the notion of community in Bratislava activist politics

Community has largely been absent from political discourses in Bratislava until its recent emergence in some activist projects. This absence is a sign of a specific post-socialist situation, evolving from weakened local ties during the socialist period and the influx of neoliberal individualism over the last twenty years. Yet, the context of Bratislava *is not* the same as in other ECE areas and the absence of community in political discourses is an outcome of *specific* multi-scalar processes, including local resistance to traditionalist nationalism and a fairly open attitude towards Western ideas.

We suggest that the notion of community is much more prominent in Western political discourses but that this difference cannot be reduced to viewing the East and West as being polar opposites, or the East 'catching up' with Western politics. Instead, such a difference materialises locally in specific and contingent circumstances. Even within Bratislava, there are *various* trajectories and

³⁶ <http://ulita.sk/sk/spolupraca/asociacia-npdm/>

constellations, and the absence and emergence of community in political discourses cannot be explained through any single narrative, such as that the cultural landscape of socialism has been superseded by imports from the West, or that the establishment of communities is a process of reconstruction, fixing the damage to local ties inflicted by communism. The activities we presented say little about the legacy of communist politics, and socialism is present in discourses more as an opportunity embedded in the built environment. On the contrary, it is the post-socialist governance and economic dynamics that is often blamed for alienating people in the city or for environmental damage. Although engagement with Western theory and praxis has been important for a number of projects, some build on embodied experiences of life in Western European countries while others take from the literature and (various) internet sources. The conceptions of community vary, as some activists view community as already existing (and preceding the collapse of communism) while others declare it is yet (needed) to be forged. Some focus on transactional praxis of engaging with policy-makers and donors, while others are largely introspective with little focus outside a single locality. Some seek to inspire a large-scale transformation of the city, while others are concerned solely with the change of a particular area. Some present a sharp distinction between the identity of activists/volunteers and community members, while others speak from the perspective of community members. The absence of a discursive politics of community is what makes Bratislava seemingly different from the West, yet it also shares a number of similarities with particular Western conceptions and specific forms of local activism. Finally, the different manners in which the notion of community is deployed in activist politics manifests the manifold ways in which a dialogue of geography and history generates specific post-socialist situations.

Conclusions

This paper calls for increased attention towards relational dynamics between Western and Eastern Europe. We suggest that some significant differences can be observed, but they cannot, as such, be reduced to an overarching difference between the West and the East. Instead, we propose

approaching temporalities and spatialities of change in Europe in a more open manner and avoiding the essentialization of the East, the West, and particularly their relations. Major contrasts between the regions can be clearly identified in some aspects of politics, culture and economy, but relations between the West and the East are ultimately porous and affect particular local constellations in contingent ways. These major differences require paying further attention to the concept of post-socialism, while their contingency makes us reject both the notions of the East and the West as polar identities and as converging in transition. Our local analysis shows that the historical absence of the concept of community in Eastern European political discourses and its recent emergence need to be interpreted through the prism of post-socialist change, but that these processes show a considerable diversity, even within the range of a single city. We have argued that the socialist past and post-socialist transformation matter for how community is approached in contemporary Bratislava; they matter in a multitude of ways but other relations across time and space can be equally as important.

We formulated and drew on the dialogic approach to post-socialism at a local level, but it could – and should – also be applied for inquiries into larger geopolitical issues significant in contemporary Europe. The image of a unified and homogenised Europe has been recently challenged and problematised, whether in the light of geopolitical tensions between Russia and the NATO, rise of populist nationalism and xenophobia across the continent, concerns about intra-EU East-West migration, or the pitch for a “two-speed Europe” currently proposed by the leaders of Western European countries (The Guardian, 2017). As such differences become more prominently articulated in public and academic debates and as culture supplements economy as a marker of difference, a retreat into binary and essentialising views of the East and the West might be tempting. This is a conceptual trap that took years to recognise and overcome when post-socialism first entered academic debates. Our argument is that the importance of history in European geographies of difference makes it crucial to revive the concept of post-socialism but also that dialogism is a more robust relational approach for when a wider range of aspects – institutional frameworks, economic and population flows, academic and non-academic knowledge, cultures and built environments,

amongst others – have to be considered in the analysis of specific differences across Europe, and of their geneeses.

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