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Introduction: Losing Appetite for the EU? Tensions around Food in Central and Eastern Europe

Petra Matijevic, Zofia Boni



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Introduction: Losing Appetite for the EU? Tensions around Food in Central and Eastern Europe

In 2017, European headlines were filling up with news of another food scandal. Evidence suggested that food products sold by multinational corporations across the European Union (EU) were produced in ‘dual quality’. In the commercial practices the Bulgarian prime minister called a ‘food apartheid’ (Boffey, 2017), several companies were supposedly supplying Central and Eastern European (CEE) markets with inferior products, compared to those intended for Western Europe. Tests indicated that if you lived in the countries of the Eastern Enlargement, your shopping basket contained chocolate bars with less cocoa, fizzy drinks with more sugar and frozen fish fingers with less fish. When reproached by the EU high officials and EU leaders on suspicion of sustaining the inequalities of the Iron Curtain era, the companies described their conduct as that of adjusting recipes to local tastes. Calls to end discriminatory business practices came to fruition in early 2019 when the EU parliament banned the sale of ‘dual-quality’ food (Sothey, 2019a). A month later, the results of an EU-wide investigation by the European Commission revealed that the commercial practices of regionally adapting recipes were far more extensive than previously known. However, this applied ‘everywhere’ in the EU and no systematic East-West discrimination could be inferred (Sothey, 2019b).

For consumers in CEE, however, the media focus on the differences in the supermarket food quality confirmed their long-standing suspicions regarding their lopsided integration into the EU. The scandal played into the growing public discontent over a ‘Europe of two speeds’ – one in which the interests of the Union’s original members took precedence over the interests of its remaining member states. These resentments were further provoked by the migrant crisis and a prolonged austerity period, imposed by national governments in the aftermath of the global recession. Both fuelled a series of mainstream nationalist populist movements that have been shaking the EU over the past decade. The movements in Central and Eastern European region can be credited with producing some of the most fiercely charged extremism and far-right sentiments. Through the support of Brexit and far-right politicians, such as Victor Orbán or Marine Le Pen, European citizens across the Union seem to be expressing their concerns about the inability of both the supra-state and national governments to ensure their social and political rights. The EU and the national identity seem entrenched on opposite banks and the failure of ‘European Dream’ (Gille, 2016, p. 94) animates comments both left and right on the political spectrum.

This special issue employs food practices to document the on-the-ground experiences of and sentiments toward the EU by the citizens of the EU Eastern Enlargement. As the ‘dual-quality’ scandal makes clear, food is never just food. Foodways express ethical positions and political deliberations about ‘good’ and ‘just’ ways of life and play a fundamental role in many areas that make us social animals. While sustenance preoccupies economies and governments, it is hard to envision practices of sociability, identity, religion, and social class without food at the centre of such distinctions. Food is not only a lens, but also a tool for translating distant and abstract, yet acutely felt social processes — like economic crises, or

inequality — into tangible and relatable forms. The ability of food to create conceptual relationships between identity and the economy movements, or formal and informal domains, makes examining food practices an effective method of studying the political processes within the EU. The special issue builds on a body of literature that has been tracing social changes in the CEE region since the collapse of the socialist rule. Through documenting food-related practices, from agriculture, labour and markets (Verdery 1999, Bridger and Pine 1998, Mandel and Humphrey 2002), to social relations and identity (Caldwell, 2009; Dunn, 2004; Mincyte, 2012), one of the main aims of this field of research has been to show how real-life experiences did not fit the streamlined narratives about the region's postsocialist trajectories proclaimed by political and economic leaders. The collection revisits that aim at a crucial moment: can an examination of Europeanization through the food practices help complicate the notion of the EU coming apart at the seams? What are the particular tensions felt in this region?

The five articles look at Europeanization through the eyes of citizens in five CEE countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – as well as members of Bulgarian diaspora in the UK and Serbian citizens. The papers examine food markets, semi-subsistence agriculture, food certification, restaurant trends, migration and home cooking. Renata Blumberg and Diana Mincyte trace Lithuanian 'food infrastructures' – e.g. trade routes, architecture, sites connecting producers to consumers, and innovations such as cold chains – to show how they determine foodways in a way that makes them less amenable to other political or social influences. Their article zooms in on informal food infrastructures – local food markets in particular. Established to offset the deficiencies of socialist supply and relied on during the postsocialist economic turmoil, local food markets acquired a renewed importance in the EU – to offer support to small food producers that find themselves squeezed by a stifling bureaucracy. Joanna Mroczkowska situates her research in the hinterlands of Eastern Poland and examines the performative, discursive and subsistence practices of small-scale pig farming, explicating how identity and social relations are firmly intertwined with peasant production in the local concept of *swoje* ('our own') food. This bond becomes more pronounced as the EU regulations and food safety standards impinge on the peasants' livelihoods and their sense of self. Ester Bardone and Astra Spalvėna explore the implementation of the EU indication and protection schemes for agricultural products in Latvia and Estonia. They analyse the differences in the application of the various schemes in the two member states and pay close attention to who profits from them and who bears the costs. Their findings suggest that in certain cases, government officials might benefit more from these schemes than producers or consumers. In a comparative survey of restaurant menus, Albena Shkodrova looks at the culinary trends in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria and an EU member since 2007, and Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, currently negotiating its EU membership. She hypothesises on the impact of EU membership on the Bulgarian hospitality industry. Looking at Bulgarian cuisine from a different angle, Ronald Ranta and Nevena Nancheva consider food through the home-making practices of Bulgarian migrants settled in the UK. The authors see food consumption as the main site on which identity is performed by migrants. Their settlement in a foreign country brings their everyday into sharper and more conscious focus.

Whether looking at the ‘traditional’ Latvian vegetable pie, Estonian cheeses, Bulgarian pastry, Lithuanian milk or Polish pork chops, the papers in this collection demonstrate that foodways are shaped politically. A variety of factors beyond the physiological ones influences these foodways: from material infrastructures, bureaucratic rules, governance technologies and national agendas, to movements of people and their social class and gender. Foodways are also bound with the ideas about national belonging and in the many conceptions of what it means to be European. We can tease out the multiple ways in which food practices are politically charged by analysing ‘appetites’. A focus on appetites links the preferences and desires for particular foods with the hopes and aspirations for particular ways of life. It reveals the frictions between the ‘tradition’ of established tastes and longings for ‘modernity’. Appetites make bodies (selves, persons or locales) the sites on which the contradictions between these poles are battled out and resolved. Not ever only a matter of individual preference, the appetite is relational and flexible. It is both the site of politics and itself a political agent. In this special issue, we are interested in how ‘European appetites’ relate to ‘appetites for Europe’.

Becoming ‘European’

The tensions emanating from the CEE region, uncovered by this collection of papers, converge around three distinct political trajectories, all of which can be referred to with the term Europeanization. First, in Central and Eastern Europe, ‘Europeanization’ is often used synonymously with ‘transition’ and its symbolic start is often placed with the fall of the Berlin Wall exactly thirty years ago. From behind the Iron Curtain and out of the drawn-out dissolution of the Non-Aligned Yugoslavia, the newly emerged nation-states joined the West on its capitalist path. Imported goods and consumer establishments flooded urban centres and animated the growth of consumer culture. As illustrated in Shkodrova’s paper, the end of socialism transformed eating out in urban Bulgaria into a vibrant affair in which Sofians discovered pizza and pasta. For most CEE citizens, however, the period after the socialist collapse was difficult. Although the socialist state supply system had been marred by shortages, deficiencies and low productivity (Verdery, 1996), it had been relatively independent of the West. The CEE countries suffered a shock once their economic borders no longer protected them from the influx of imported commodities. The ‘transition’ was further exacerbated in many CEE countries by the rapid sale of public companies and property and caused widespread poverty, unemployment and a flourishing informal economy (Blumberg and Mincyte this issue; Bridger & Pine, 1998; Mandel & Humphrey, 2002; Caldwell, 2009).

Agriculture was among the areas experiencing the most profound changes in the postsocialist period. Whether collectivised or not, agriculture in the CEE was characterised by a few major state holdings among a multitude of small farms. Smallholders were instrumental in sustaining cities through the disruptions in state distribution. Property restitution processes after the socialist collapse either divided the state farms into smaller ones, and added to the fragmentation, or facilitated their sale to foreign investors. Smallholders struggled to compete with importing producers offering low prices. The informal economic webs the small producers spun together with urbanites during the socialist

period began to support the small producers themselves after socialism when the state protection withered, as shown in the papers by Blumberg and Mincyte and by Mroczkowska.

A myriad of urban households held onto small plots of land, networks of exchange with rural kin and a range of self-subsistence practices after socialism. However, when viewed alongside discriminatory shopping practices described above, these local foodways could not be interpreted solely as a safety net used in a sluggish, crisis-ridden economy. Rather, they represented the main arena for channelling and interpreting capitalist transformations. In the wider postsocialist region, food trends such as *nash* ('ours', Caldwell, 2002) and *swoje*, elaborated by Mroczkowska in this issue, were a conduit for anxieties about the impacts of the industrialised food supply and opening of markets. A variety of 'food nationalisms' – favouring home-grown, nostalgic and local products – surged after the end of socialist rule and were observed ever since (Humphrey, 1995; Caldwell, 2002; Klumbytė, 2010).

Second, Europeanization can signify the formal process of integration into the EU. Fifteen years ago, in 2004, the EU added eight former socialist countries as members: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 and Croatia became a member in 2013. The free movement of people that accompanies EU membership caused an increase in the outmigration from the CEE countries to the Western member states. The free movement of goods initially brought swift economic growth to the CEE region where the labour was cheaper. The sale of public companies to foreign owners tied these assets to Western and global markets. These international links amplified the effects of the global recession of 2008-9 in CEE. The EU funds for entrepreneurial activities in lagging regions brought certain opportunities. If one was resourceful and could align oneself with directions in the EU policies, one could benefit from the financial support (Shkodrova, Bardone and Spālvēna, this issue).

Yet CEE agriculture suffered a further decline as part of the EU market. Blumberg and Mincyte argue in this issue that the less favourable conditions for EU membership in the Eastern EU accessions were guided by ideas of Eastern European inferiority and by the trouble of absorbing a high number of CEE agricultural plots into the EU agricultural payments scheme. It was assumed that small farmers would leave agriculture after failing to keep up with food safety standards and to modernise their production. For those food producers that persisted, subsidies have kept them barely functioning. Accessing commercial agricultural markets required introducing a variety of costly improvements, so informal economies like milk markets continued to offer a lifeline (Mincyte, 2012). Bardone's and Spālvēna's paper gives evidence on how smallholders are increasingly compelled to consider food production a bureaucratic skill and an entrepreneurial venture able to cater to foreign and domestic tourists.

Many food producers experience the EU as a 'technozone' (Dunn, 2005) – a field of increasingly exclusionary standards, regulations and schemes one has to satisfy to sustain a livelihood. Together, these elements constitute a technology of government, which impresses the social role of the citizen onto people's sense of self. Examples from the papers include a limited and complicated enforcement of the regulations that motivates self-disciplining

producer associations (Bardone and Spalvėna, this issue), and the interpretation of the EU regulations by the national authorities in a stricter way than originally intended, which aggravates the negative impact of the regulations (Mroczkowska, this issue). The producers unable to conform are pushed toward the margins where they might enter alternative infrastructures, or risk being disarticulated as productive social beings (Blumberg and Mincyte, this issue).

Europeanization in its third sense refers to a civilising process, an adoption of the ideals of liberal democracy, not only in their legal and commercial application but to acquire a particular *habitus* (Gille, 2016; Elias, 2000). The papers show how developing an appetite for Europe rested on a vision of ‘better lives’: on a desire for modernity, prosperity, protection, and a sense of belonging. This often entailed replacing the socialist legacy with the Western narratives of CEE backwardness and needing to catch up (Borneman & Fowler, 1997; Todorova, 1997). The end of the socialist rule was celebrated in many corners of CEE as a path ‘back to Europe’, a return to the nation’s civilizational roots. Often, this ‘return’ was fuelled by nationalism charged against a country’s internal others (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Verdery, 1996). The anxiety over whether a CEE identity is ‘properly’ European is not a new sentiment. As Shkodrova explains in this issue, Bulgarians and Serbs felt ‘European, but not quite’ already in the nineteenth century. Similar notions have informed the introduction of radical neoliberal market policies in Lithuania (Blumberg and Mincyte, this issue); inspired a sense of relief in Bulgarian migrants once they qualified as ‘desirable migrants’ (Ranta and Nancheva, this issue); and prompted Baltic government officials to seek an EU endorsement of their local products as the national cultural heritage (Bardone and Spalvėna, this issue; also see Aistara, 2014).

Repackaging perceived backwardness as the pre-socialist peasant heritage while downplaying the socialist legacy, a practice outlined by Bardone and Spalvėna, is one example showing that the creation of appetites for Europe is never a smooth and unidirectional process. Changes, even material ones, do not take root on a blank slate but interact with previous local constellations of power and materiality, producing ‘fuzzy’ results (Verdery, 1999), ‘grey zones’ (Knudsen & Frederiksen, 2015) or ‘frictions’ (Gille, 2016; Tsing, 2005) whenever the ‘East’ touches the ‘West’. The frictions produced by food and safety standards, agricultural systems, ideas about modernity and other structuring forces shaping appetites, resonate with one sentiment in particular in the collected papers – the ambivalence of the relationship between Europe and the nation.

National Identity in the EU

In tracing the developments of the restaurant ‘scenes’ in Sofia and Belgrade, Shkodrova engages with the Eurosceptical fear of losing local and national cultural characteristics in the EU integration process. In particular, she looks at the anxieties that the EU regulations would render illegal the crucial elements of national cuisines and local informal food production. Shkodrova argues that the opposite, in fact, occurs. European integration can empower national cuisines to become sturdier, more assertive and, importantly, more open to the interpretation and creative agency of domestic producers and culinary brokers. She finds chefs in Sofia and Belgrade liberally adopting a Mediterranean-inspired cooking with fresh

ingredients, foraged foods and less meat, distinctly different from the once-popular Balkan cuisine. In Bulgaria, a full EU member, free trade gives the industry an additional level of access to artisanal specialties, while open borders allow it to tap into the expertise of migrating chefs. EU membership is blending the once inflexible Bulgarian cuisine with its wider regional culinary origins, into a state that Shkodrova sees as more 'natural'.

To interpret the changes she observes, Shkodrova adopts the idea of Europeanization as a cultural transformation leading to cosmopolitanism (Delanty & Rumford, 2005). In this developmental view, a greater number of choices offered by an open market translates into greater sovereignty in defining what is national and what references it. Once elevated to the level of 'developed' cuisines, national food, says Shkodrova, is no longer defined by 'deficits or ideology', as it was during the socialist period, but by 'possibilities and ideas'. While Shkodrova's cosmopolitan stance encouragingly shines a more positive light onto the European project, it does little to challenge the notion that the nation and the EU stand in opposition: the former as the cradle of tradition, the latter as a champion of modernity. Evidence from the remaining papers in this special issue complicates this binary and shows how one can entail the other.

Like Sofian chefs, the Bulgarian migrants settling in the UK, featured in Ranta's and Nancheva's paper, whose foodways are the primary ways of expressing national belonging, also benefit from EU membership. Yet their emotional imaginaries of what it means to be Bulgarian entail recreating precisely the kind of traditional national cuisine that Shkodrova sees as disappearing in Sofia since joining the EU. The migrants' 'everyday nationalism' employs not only an inflated sense of the domestic but also the dated gender roles of food production: vegetable pickling for women, meat smoking for men. Moreover, the 'synthesis of European and Oriental cuisines' with artisanal food as the foundation of the new Bulgarian cooking in the EU will most likely entail sourcing the specialties from the kind of small producers that populate Mroczkowska's paper. Yet since their food production entails a strong insistence on local identity and traditional gendered roles, the livelihoods of smallholders are threatened by the very same processes that benefit the Sofian chefs.

Bardone and Spalvėna challenge Shkodrova's vision of creative regional culinary fusion under the EU integration by discussing processes that have produced quite the opposite effect. They describe a case of certifying a type of cheese found in both Latvia and Estonia. These countries share a culinary history that predates the formation of the nation-states. Yet to comply with the EU heritage protection framework, the Latvian and Estonian producers filed the certification applications for two separate products, under two separate schemes. In the paper by Bardone and Spalvėna, European integration appears as a recognition of the national, with traditional foods becoming a marker of the national identity only once affirmed as such by the EU in a prescribed way. In their further examples, the authors uncover how the EU food certification schemes that supposedly cherish tradition encourage producers to use unseasonable and non-local ingredients and to selectively ignore the historical background of the dish. Rather than offering protection to food producers or local consumers, certified products serve as a source of pride for the national authorities that regard them as national symbols on the EU map, as evidence of cultural integration, and as worthy of being labelled

‘European products’. Food quality schemes, Bardone and Spalvėna affirm, are nation-branding tools (DeSoucey, 2010).

The EU emerging from reading the papers of the special issue is not one that either dissolves all national characteristics or ennobles them by allowing freer, more creative expressions. It appears instead as a platform for the regulated and monitored national competition (Gille, 2016; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016). Zsuzsa Gille (2016) draws on the work of John and Jean Comaroff (2009) to suggest that the EU constitutes a new identity economy that knits together ethnicity and the market and transforms cultural products into commodities. Geographical indications and food quality schemes are but one legal instrument for commodifying ethnicity and authenticity to create ‘European’ products (Aistara, 2014; Gille, 2016). Once on the EU map, the ‘national’ becomes a ‘destination’ and the foreigner and tourist gaze becomes crucial in sustaining small ‘ethnopreneurial’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009) ventures. For the industry of fine dining in Sofia, this pressure to keep up may be a positive outcome of EU integration. This may prove less so in other areas, such as semi-subsistence agriculture.

The Politics of Appetite

Not all identities in the EU can fit the ethnopreneurial mould. The farmer identity of Polish peasants in Mroczkowska’s paper is crucial to their livelihood. Mroczkowska shows that masculinity, kinship relations and trans-local cooperation are not only produced in the course of pig farming; they are the ingredients integral to sustaining the cycles of the peasant mode of production. Their identity is bound with their practice. The concept of *swoje* food is not linked to national food, Mroczkowska insists, but to whatever can ‘uphold a traditional way of life’. We can think about *swoje* not as peasants’ obstinate refusal to change with the times, but as something that justifies to themselves the need to operate increasingly in an informal economy in order to protect their livelihood and their identity from being deconstructed by the EU food safety regulations. In a further example that links identity to practice, Ranta and Nancheva look at how national belonging is performed in Bulgarian migrant foodways but fail to pin them down to a specific Bulgarian ingredient or recipe. They observe instead that what makes a foodstuff able to construct and represent a particular national identity, lies not in the food itself but in the efforts exerted to produce. The labour that goes into making *banitsa*, even from imported ingredients, or into smoking a supermarket-bought British sausage, is what makes a dish Bulgarian and as such, a token of belonging. What shines through these examples is the people’s aspiration to define their own identities, to be able to act in a sovereign way and to retain a sense of agency.

Gille encourages us to pay attention to how the protection of livelihoods and welfare of European citizens is unevenly distributed (2016). The EU can both facilitate and curtail citizen agency, and often selectively pushes people into informal existence. If people’s appetites are not allowed sufficient space in the formal EU structures, growing frictions lead to their dated and more strong-willed informal assertions. People’s reasonable grievances – over being offered lower quality products, for example – and their resentment about not being heard can then be harvested by politicians and weaponised by populist narratives. While nationalisms are condemned by the critics as being wholly oppositional to the European

project, Gille's work (*ibid.*) and the historical review by Blumberg and Mincyte in this issue, can help us understand how nationalisms could have come to serve as an important informal infrastructure with which the shortcomings of the formal European cosmopolitanism are overcome by those on the European margins.

To address these pressing problems, we will need to listen to the multitude of voices and experiences of Europe. The EU has many faces, as the papers make clear. We need to refine our ability to recognise a diversity of responses to it and ideas about what it is. Because it was always closely integrated with identity, Europeanization in CEE was always also merged with food practices. This is why appetite, conceived as political and as an analytical tool, as a set of material and symbolic needs and desires for and exemplified within foodways, can help navigate these troubles. A sensitivity to appetite is crucial to avoid insisting that Europeans conform to a single vision of staying together and going forward. How have appetites been whetted, satisfied and suppressed in Central and Eastern Europe? We invite you to read the special issue through this lens.

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