The Uses of Victimhood as a Hegemonic Meta-Narrative in Eastern Europe

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Narratives of wartime suffering, communist evils, and maltreatment by the 'West' have started featuring prominently in the political discourse across eastern Europe in the past decade and half. Permeating the public sphere, such narratives imply complex victimhood and often gain a hegemonic status. Why have such victimhood narratives become so pervasive? And what has been their purpose across eastern Europe? This interdisciplinary article provides a conceptual and empirical explanation of how hegemonic narratives of victimhood have been used to enhance ontological security and as an instrument of power-seeking political leaders, especially (but not exclusively) right-wing populists. It shows that although the local attachment to memory and history is often portrayed as irrational, victimhood as a narrative has clear benefits regarding national ontological security as the self-understanding of a state and a tool to justify policies. Using concrete examples, the articles identifies three main sub-narratives of direct, historical and structural victimhood linked to World War II, communism and the precarious relationship with the 'West', arguing that the combination of historical traumas and the post-1989 transformations explain the pan-regional proliferation of victimhood.

Keywords: victimhood, hegemony, narratives, ontological security, eastern Europe, war, communism

Introduction

It rarely happens that a study of economic history sparks a public controversy in the Czech Republic. However, in 2011, a micro-history of late socialism *The End of an Experiment: Perestroika and the Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia* by Michal Pullman ignited a heated debate about the nature of the last phases of communism. While the more scholarly discussions over the book focused on methodology and concepts, the uncompromising anti-communist defenders of the term 'totalitarian' accused Pullman of relativising history, 'propagating lies' and comparing some of his later statements to those of Adolf Eichmann (Šafr 2020). Pullman argued that the regime sustained itself on consent, daily complicity, and cooperation of over 1.5 million party members.[1] Instead of presenting Czechs as victims of an imposed and oppressive totalitarian regime as is commonly done, Pullman focussed on the mundane aspects of everyday life and argued for a degree of plurality that undermined the thesis of criminal totalitarianism. To his staunchest critics, he belittled Czech victimhood and relativized the Czech post-1989 understanding of itself as a nation that has suffered across history for no guilt of its own.[2] When the book came out in 2011, the depiction of 'the whole post-war period in the black-and-white colours of totalitarian theory' (Kopeček 2008, 76) was already past its heyday but the public pillory of Pullman (who later became Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University) showed that it had many supporters even if it was no longer the only optics of how to view communism.

Until today, it has been remarkably rare to get into arguments over whether communism was 'good' or 'bad' as the answer of most of the Czech intellectual commentariat is: it was 'bad' (cf. Buchtík et al. 2021). The widely accepted historical narrative of Czech communism runs as follows: the Soviets externally imposed communism in the 1948 'putsch' that abruptly ended the peaceful interwar democratic period and the

liberators became occupiers. The subsequent communist repression was brutal (characterized by political trials and executions), resisted (embodied in the reform efforts of 1968), generally opposed by the majority (illustrated by stories of daily resistance), and culminated in the Velvet Revolution that showed the widespread dissatisfaction with the regime as well as suggested a 'continuity' of the Czech democracy that belonged to Europe. As Veronika Pehe (2021) tersely wrote, 'anti-communism became part and parcel of the grand narrative of the post-communist era of a "return to democracy" through casting the communist past as totalitarian'. Although the black-and-white narrative of communism has been challenged by a growth of more pluralist memory practices and scholars (cf. Blaive 2021), Czech political and intellectual elites continue to cast the communist past in dark terms only, often for political aims such as to delegitimize left-leaning political ideas.

How do we explain the power of such hegemonic portrayals? What functions do such narratives fulfil? And specifically, why are such narratives so often linked to victimhood? As I argue in this article, it is not only the link to power, as generally postulated in the scholarship on hegemony, but the close link to ontological (in-)security that conditions the pervasiveness of hegemonic narratives, especially those focusing on collective suffering, sacrifice and maltreatment. Indeed, the vignette above points to the role of hegemonic narratives in what a growing scholarship calls 'ontological security', defined as a lasting sense of collective self that is manifested through political agency, especially in societies undergoing transitions and change (Steele 2008). As I argue, the Czech narrative of criminal totalitarianism is essentially a narrative of victimhood and can be explained as a response to transformational changes that upended one lived experience and thrust a society into a new world, thus yearning for simple narratives that would provide a moral compass. Of course, this is not a uniquely Czech phenomenon. Instead, it is common in the wider east European region, and even further afield. Central, east and southeast Europe (from the Baltics to the

3

Balkans) that I here denote as 'eastern Europe' is a geographical region that shares a history of many traumatic transformations and features an abundance of victimhood narratives of suffering, sacrifice and injustice.[3] It is a region where cultural and historical cleavages are becoming increasingly potent at the backdrop of the post-1989 developments, accession to the European Union (EU), growing scepticism towards the 'West' as a political entity and hostility towards neoliberalism (cf. Styczyńska 2017; Bešlin et al. 2020). The regional diversity and different memories of World War II, communism and suffering across the region provide not only an abundance of variation to explore but also commonalities to highlight.

Analysing eastern Europe, I show that political 'memory entrepreneurs' (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) across the region have engaged in the production, distortion and dissemination of the content of victimhood in particular in order to tap into a multitude of ontological insecurities linked to the 'desire for self-esteem, honor, status, and prestige' as 'a key motivation of action in world politics' (Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele 2021, 23). I propose a novel conceptual understanding of three victimhood narratives that have been applied by political and social actors with different purposes, and that create a hegemonic meta-narrative of victimhood that differs across the region but bears similarities. Focusing on the content and sources of victimhood, I study key narratives linked to totalitarian oppression (that also includes equivalating communism and Nazism), sacrifice (during wars where national victims are prioritized) and maltreatment/humiliation (and even historical abandonment) by the West. While the first two have been common across the region for some time (Ghodsee 2014; Neumayer 2015; Subotić 2019; Lim 2021), victimhood stemming from an alleged maltreatment by the West has only recently become an expedient political resource for populist political actors who draw legitimacy and popularity on their purported defence of people, traditions and culture (Vachudova 2020). I show that such hegemonic

narratives are politically useful and popular: they justify policies and silence opposition, and they cut through the mnemonic 'noise' of complex histories.

This article presents an original contribution placed in the growing scholarly interest in the political uses of hegemonic narratives, victimhood, memory politics and ontological security. In my argumentation, I combine studies in comparative politics, memory, history, and International Relations (IR) to analyse the relationship between hegemonic narratives of victimhood and ontological security. I approach victimhood as a concept whose political life can primarily be understood as a narrative for expressing grievances as well as part of social identity and status (Horwitz 2018; Cole 2006; Jankowitz 2018; Chouliaraki 2021; Jacoby 2015), which can reach a hegemonic status. Research on victimhood – especially in social psychology and human rights scholarship – has grown in the past decade, becoming 'an urgent, global concern' due to the continuation of human suffering in wars and oppression, social and political effects of historical traumatic memories, and existing structural inequalities (Vollhardt 2020, 2). Consequently, as an expression of wrongdoing and harm, victimhood can result from direct victimization[4] of individuals and groups (e.g. casualties in wars), historical injustice (e.g. colonial subjugations of groups), and/or structural injustice (e.g. discrimination of minorities). The original victimhood literature on group-based violence and conflict primarily focused on the effects of direct victimization, the role of victims in claim-making and the various complex roles assigned to individuals such as victims, survivors, perpetrators, martyrs and heroes (Barton Hronešová 2020; Bouris 2007; De Waardt and Weber 2019; Golubovic 2021; Govier 2015; Krystalli 2021; Orr 2001; Saeed 2016). Subsequent scholarship in politics and International Relations on memory, security and foreign policy focussed on how victimhood can be utilized in defence of one's national positions, foreign policy and understandings of the past (Lim 2010; 2021; Lerner 2020; Subotić 2019; Gustafsson 2014). Finally, a growing interdisciplinary scholarship has recently

emerged that studies victimhood as a political and social mobilization narrative tool that has been applied both by those making justified claims to victimhood as well as those who misapply it to claim moral high ground and innocence (Cole 2006; Armaly and Enders 2021; Horwitz 2018). My contribution here builds on this scholarship, particularly leveraging the insights from the latest insights on victimhood being used both legitimately but also illegitimately in a 'reverse' fashion and as part of a growing trend of 'affective politics' where emotions play an important role in social mobilization (Chouliaraki 2021). Studying the east European region, I show that rather than an identity position of direct victims or survivors, victimhood has become a political narrative tool with policy objectives and a means to shift the blame, deflect guilt and maintain moral high ground.

In what follows, I first discuss the role of narratives and their hegemonies and link their importance to ontological security as these two concepts underpin my understanding of the uses of victimhood narratives. I highlight how societies undergoing massive transformations espouse a variety of hegemonic narratives, which provide a reliable sense of existential stability and predictability. My main focus is then on unpacking victimhood in eastern Europe empirically as a hegemonic meta-narrative (a narrative that contains other narratives). I argue that historical victimhood narratives of totalitarianism (1), of direct sacrificial and patriotic wartime suffering during World War II and in the Balkan cases in the 1990s (2), and of alleged structural maltreatment/humiliation by the West (3) have been applied both for instrumental political aims *as well as* to reduce national ontological insecurity. While focusing on eastern Europe, I conclude that hegemonic narratives can be perilous for *any* democracy as they seemingly validate the voice of the dominant 'people' and repress minority positions. Although they are primarily applied in undemocratic regimes, I argue that they are not an exclusive prerogative of populists or autocrats.

What Makes Hegemonic Narratives Pervasive?

The current usage of 'hegemony' is multifaceted but has come to be associated with power inequalities. Antonio Gramsci, a pioneering theorist of cultural hegemony, stressed the role of ideology and discourse that 'elites' produce and disseminate. In this vein, hegemons are warriors who no longer wield swords but words to spread their control and establish 'conditioned consent' (Gramsci 2007). This means that hegemony can be willingly accepted, through persuasion and the employment of powerful narratives as 'selective appropriation of past events and characters' (Ewick and Silbey 1995, 200). Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Stuart Hall, among others, argued that hegemony refers to the ability of powerful elites to have their views, norms and values accepted by citizens as natural and 'common sense'. Following from this, Molden (2016, 128) sees hegemonic narratives as becoming the one and only taken-for-granted versions of collective memory in communities. Narratives thus become hegemonic when they simplify reality, provide a discursive order, certainty (usually in binary terms of good-bad), and a relatable and unidirectional framework with a quasi-natural universality and acceptance, concurrently delegitimizing those who think or remember differently.

Such a common-sense acceptance of hegemonies stems from different power dynamics. Since the 1950s, Raven, French and colleagues have built a social framework of power, arguing that in addition to 'coercion', there are five other dynamics at play between the powerful and the subjects/subordinates: when the powerful distribute rewards; when the powerful are perceived as legitimate; when the subjects identify with the powerful; when the powerful are perceived as having special, 'expert', knowledge; and when the powerful use information to persuade the subjects (French, Raven, and Cartwright 1959; Raven 2008). Therefore, 'powerful elites' include political and financial elites, media, priests, intellectuals, civil society groups, scholars and other professionals who are able to compel their

interpretation as *the one* acceptable way to understand and engage with the past, present, and future. Powerful actors can create and reshape narratives through education, media, public institutions such as museums and other sources of culture. Jelena Subotić pointedly described this process as follows:

> 'Over time and with infinite iteration by narrative "entrepreneurs"—political leaders, elite intellectuals, education establishment, popular culture, the media—and everyday social practice, a particular state narrative template (of past events, or of the general place of the state in the international system) fixes the meaning of the past and limits the opportunity for further political contestation. A constructed narrative reaches a tipping point threshold when a critical mass of social actors accepts and buys into it as a social fact. … It becomes hegemonic. … Alternative narratives stop making sense; they do not sound coherent and are not compelling' (Subotić 2016, 615).

Any iterated and propagated narrative can become hegemonic when it is accepted as given, truthful and common-sensical social fact by a 'critical mass', especially if disseminated by the powerful. While it is difficult to analytically establish an exact measure of 'critical mass', there are proxies that we can use to study the appeal of such narratives, most notably polling data, party preferences, and media reporting. Most importantly, the absence, discrediting and silencing of alternative narratives and voices in the public sphere suggests the presence of a mnemonic hegemony. The repertoire from where to draw such narratives is consequently rich. Myths, folk stories, or even deliberate historical manipulation are common (Tucker 2008). Yet stories do not come out of thin air, they are rarely entirely invented. Instead, actors mix individual recollections and some existing 'usable' aspects of memory, patterns of behaviour as well as history (Moeller 1996). Narratives evolve, feed off of other narratives, and borrow some aspects of wider reference frames. In other words, they can be 'multidirectional' (Rothberg 2009). They draw on existing unifying narratives that are

denoted as 'dominant' and 'master' narratives.[5] Several dominant narratives may be complementary or compete (Pietraszewski and Törnquist-Plewa, 2022). Similarly, there may be 'official master narratives' that involve 'advancing one version of history' (Jelin 2003, 27) and that can become hegemonic over time.

This suggests that hegemonic narratives are utilitarian and applied with a purpose (Fernandes 2017, 5–7). They are aimed at legitimizing policies and regimes, discrediting dissent but especially (re)producing power hierarchies and increasing majoritarian unity. Hegemonic narratives thus naturally lend themselves as a tool of control for autocrats. In autocratic systems, 'coercive' power is certainly applied more often than 'expert' or 'legitimate' power. However, hegemonic narratives are present in democracies too, even if the power dynamics differs and even if they can be challenged and contested. As a rich scholarship on counter-narratives show, '[t]here are always subnarratives, transitional periods, and contests over dominance' (Olick 1998, 381). They can also be transnational and global when endorsed by powerful actors who exercise expert or legitimate power over the international discourse.[6] Prominent examples are the purported spread of human rights as a response to World War II (Moyn 2010), the cosmopolitan mode of remembering of the Holocaust (Dragović-Soso 2022) and the institutional model of liberal democracy that has directed foreign policies such as peacebuilding (Baker and Obradović-Wochnik 2016).

Increasingly the current narrative debates focus on various aspects of direct, historical and structural victimhood. As some noted, we live in an 'age of victimhood' (Towle 2018) where victimhood narratives of suffering, grievances, discrimination and injustice accompany the rise of human rights and are used to establish legitimate political claims (Horwitz 2018). For example, the current belated and contentious discussions surrounding the legacy of slavery and segregation in many established democracies are a case in point of how overdue lingering hegemonic narratives (of racial superiority) persevere in democracies and clash

with counter-narratives of structural victimhood of discrimination and inferior positionality (see especially Mamdani 2020). In many societies affected by war-time violence, hegemonic victimhood status emerges in an efforts to establish a uniform interpretation of the past (cf. Ibreck 2012).

Narratives as a Resource for Ontological Security

Not only victimhood but many other collective narratives are important as anchors for 'common understandings and interpretation' of the past and present (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 321). National narratives in particular are essentially (positive) stories we tell about ourselves and (negative) stories we tell about others (cf. Bilali 2012). According to Subotić, '[G]roups need a narrative, compelling story of where did 'we' come from, how did we come to be who we are, what brings us together in a group, what purpose and aspirations does our group have' (2016, 612). Persuasive national narratives provide continuity, sense of belonging and positive imaginations about the 'self' as a nation. They are thus often constructed and applied strategically in international politics to increase such feelings (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017). This sense of belonging is constitutive of 'ontological security' defined as 'the seeking of a consistent self through time and space, and the desire to have that self recognized and affirmed by others' (Steele and Innes 2013, 15). Forging a fairly constant ontological security depends on some established patterns of behaviours (routines), norms and values, but especially collective narratives. The more persuasive the narratives are, the stronger the unity. Ontological security scholars apply the term 'biographical narratives' as the underpinning stories of the self that provide a 'stable sense of identity' (Steele 2008, 72). Hegemonic biographical narratives are a particular type

of extremely powerful narratives that can be comforting and appeasing, especially if explaining some traumatic national events.

Ontological security in some analyses overlaps with identity (for a critique, see Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele 2021). However, ontological security is a primarily internal process of self-identification and reflection within a community (Ejdus 2020, 14; Steele 2008, 5–6). While the realization of identity is always relational and established through agency and interaction with others (Subotić 2016, 7), ontological security represents the simple internal understanding of oneself and its establishment is an 'inherent condition' of 'security-as-being' (Mälksoo 2015, 224). Ontological security thus stands for the creation of social frameworks that 'make sense', reduce anxiety, increase expectations of oneself that are then acted upon through public manifestations (e.g., museums, commemorations). Although ontological security is rarely stable or even perfectly established, political actors often aim to fixate it as much as they can as it allows for predictability and 'ontological peace'.

Seeking ontological security 'can be seen most clearly where it is absent' (Steele and Innes 2013, 18). In periods when a community's underlying vision of itself and its autobiography is challenged or rewritten, narratives, and especially hegemonic narratives, become a resource how to forge, re-establish or increase ontological security. They provide a coping and comforting mechanism. New-born states fear for their survival but also for their honour, prestige and place in the world. Ayşe Zarakol argued that despite clear benefits to accept guilt and apologise for historical wrongdoing, neither Japan nor Turkey were able to do so because it would compromise their honour. Although both countries are concerned about 'their international standing and hypersensitive to criticism by the West' (Zarakol 2010, 8), apologizing for atrocities committed in the name of their people would compromise their ontological security by admitting to an inferior (oriental) status and lack of Europeanness as a civilization status of superiority (ibid., 20). The seemingly irrational,

stubborn and overwhelming insistence upon Kosovo's belonging to Serbia can also be explained through the role of hegemonic narratives in ontological security. Serbian political, intellectual and cultural elites have framed Kosovo as Serbian birthland, gluing it to Serbian understanding of itself (see Dragović-Soso 2002). Together with a sense of 'perpetual victimization' (Nielsen 2022, 133), the loss of Kosovo in 2008 generated 'a deep state of anxiety in Serbia' and a crisis of Serbian ontological security (Ejdus 2020, 4). Foreign policy in these cases has not been the outcome of physical security concerns but worries about narratives that underpin a country's ontological security.

However, 'healthy' ontological security accommodates for disruptions and cognitive dissonance as they can be helpful for deliberation and informational progress (Mitzen 2006, 346). This is why hegemonic narratives remain rather common in pluralist societies too. Germany offers a useful case of how hegemonic narratives about the Holocaust shifted from early silence and personal (German) victimhood to atonement and the understanding of the Holocaust as a civilizational rupture. Yet even the most recent German battling with its past demonstrates the resistance and polarization induced by the hegemonic narrative from the 1990s about the uniqueness of the Holocaust (see Rothberg 2022). When this hegemonic frame is challenged by counter-narratives, it comes from those who highlight the usefulness of comparisons with other atrocities on the one hand and the radical right on the other (A. Assmann 2021; see also Moses 2021). Consequently, proponents of a nuanced historical understanding and radicals advocating outright denial are lumped under the label 'relativists'. Hegemonic narratives thus remain in pluralist societies too, especially in those with vulnerable ontological securities.

Victimhood as a Hegemonic Meta-Narrative in Eastern Europe

What is then the role of victimhood in ontological security? Victimhood as identity, status and a narrative can act as a powerful and emotional component of national autobiographies, often reaching hegemonic levels. Victimhood is a Ianus-faced term in contemporary politics. It denotes suffering, righteousness and innocence (Barton Hronešová 2020; Golubovic 2021), but it can also be applied to make political and social claims, which may not always be legitimate (Horwitz 2018; Cole 2006; Chouliaraki 2021). Claiming 'victimhood' can not only be a right of those directly harmed (victims) but also a strategic position for those who want to claim a sense of moral high ground in order to exonerate themselves from potential wrongdoing. Victimhood can thus be a powerful and emotionally resonant political position to utilize for its capacity to deflect guilt of those who may be implied in wrongdoing or even directly responsible for it. As outlined at the onset of this article, the basis for making claims to victimhood (that is victimizations) can vary from direct suffering, historical injustices, structural legacies, or a combination thereof. Across eastern Europe, all of these victimizations co-exist, often feeding off each other due to the region's traumatic history (Snyder 2009), leading to a 'regional desire for victimhood status' as Ghodsee (2014, 117) put it.

'The competition for victimhood' as 'a hallmark of much contemporary public discourse' (Rozett 2022, 12) in the region draws on real and inflated traumas and grievances such as direct war suffering, historical injustice related to World War II and communism, and a sense of being patronized and humiliated by structural inequalities between the politically defined 'East and West'. The recent rise of these victimhood narratives is not only the result of liberalization of the public discourse after 1989 but a method to make sense of it at the backdrop of massive changes. The end of communism ushered in democracy and prosperity

13

as well as inequality, corruption, and disenchantment with liberalism (Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021, 2). The subsequent political and social instability, quick advent of new technologies, and globalization have diminished levels of trust, reinforced feelings of ontological vulnerability, and contributed to a growth of exclusionary and radical politics. While there is no agreement upon what has driven the recent rise of political polarization across the region, there is enough evidence to suggest that the main political cleavages are no longer on the left-right economic axis but on social and cultural matters where victimhood plays a key role (Vachudova 2020; Agarin 2020). Post-1989 international influences on the region also brought about new memory practices, especially regarding Holocaust remembrance, that have collided with local nation-specific memories based on heroism and have consequently been resisted (cf. Malinova 2021). Cast as 'pedagogy of shame' by right-wing populists in particular, cosmopolitan human rights discourse and Holocaust remembrance have been successfully resisted, arguing that they cannot supersede national victimhood (Törnquist-Plewa 2021).

Historical victimhood in particular has often been used as a tool for nationalist causes as it conveniently combines ideas of martyrdom and heroism (Lerner 2020; Towle 2018). In eastern Europe, it has also been the main pan-regional framework for 'the fate of small nations', paraphrasing the Hungarian political scientist István Bibó who in 1946 saw the region as hysterically fearing predation by larger nations while at the same time seeing the political West indebted to the East for the geopolitical divisions of Europe after 1945 (Bibó 1997). Indeed, after 1945 one could even speak of a distinct scholarly field of 'small states' studies, seriously considering E.H. Carr's opinion that small nation-states would become obsolete (Keohane 1969; Kruizinga 2022, 4–6). In 2005, Tony Judt summed up the previous century by concluding that 'the little nations of eastern Europe have lived for centuries in fear of their own extinction' (2005, 176). More recently, Ekiert and Ziblatt noted that 'the fate of

small nations in the region was too often seen as an inevitable outcome of international power politics (e.g., Trianon, Yalta) over which domestic actors had no control' (2013, 98). While these assertions are more linked to existential security, which has since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 grown in the region, it has been especially ontological insecurity that has greatly conditioned the post-1989 political developments that have produced little clarity about the region's historical belonging and direction beyond the Euro-Atlantic integration.

An acute sense of national belonging and cultural idiosyncrasies[7] has brought various forms of victimhood to the forefront in eastern Europe in 1989 after four decades of communist interpretations of the past (Stone 2012). Victimhood in eastern Europe thus represents a meta-narrative that is multidirectional as each of its constitutive narratives borrows from, feeds off of and builds on each other in a constantly evolving way (Rothberg 2009). While each country has its idiosyncratic memories and grievances to draw upon, the meta-narrative consists of three main interlinked parts that sustain each other and that are instrumental-political *as well as* stemming from ontological insecurity. It has been generated and disseminated over the past three decades by politicians, intellectuals and the media (especially when politically controlled), taking root as an accepted plight of the 'small nations' in eastern Europe.

The first component of this meta-narrative leverages the injustice and crimes committed by the 'totalitarian' communist regimes, which is linked to equivalating the severity and criminality of communism and Nazism as the 'two evils in the East European memory' (Lim 2021, 107). This narrative was particularly widespread in the Baltics and Central Europe in the first two decades after 1989 but has since the Russian war in Ukraine resurfaced in the media. The second, which has been on the rise in the recent decade, is linked to direct and historical war victimhood as well as the Holocaust (and in the Yugoslav case to the 1990s wars). The political and intellectual effort here is to highlight national

suffering so that crimes on others (e.g. Jews, Roma, ethnic minorities) seem secondary, creating hierarchization and competition of victimhood. Finally, the latest narrative has proliferated after the 2008 financial meltdown and been used by right-wing populists. It has focussed on structural inequalities in the global order, portraying the West as subjugating the sovereignty of the East. The likes of Viktor Orbán, Robert Fico, Aleksandar Vučić, Janez Janša, Zoran Milanović, Andrej Babiš and Jaroslaw Kaczynski have all used victimhood to stylize themselves as defenders of their people who 'stick it up' to the foreigners and/or the EU apparatus in Brussels in particular. While the first two narratives are aimed at wider policy objectives of a country, the final one is more linked to power ambitions of right-wing leaders. All three ultimately enhance ontological security. Table 1 outlines the meta-narrative with its parts, objectives and policy examples. These narratives also plot differently in across the region and at specific times, which is beyond my aims here, but I offer some examples below.

Table 1. Hegemonic meta-narrative of victimhood in Eastern Europe

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First, the totalitarian historical victimhood narrative that depicts communism as 'the dark vision of the totalitarian hell of the Stalinist kind' (Kopeček 2008, 83) emerged early in the 1990s as a reaction to the end of communism. Based on a mixture of historical facts and inventions, politicians, journalists and intellectuals have depicted domestic conflicts and political development as conditioned by post-1945 geopolitics only, side-lining local politics and divisions. Local intellectual, professional and political elites portrayed communism as a foreign import, as 'tyrannies maintained by constant terror and devoid of any popular

support' (Neumayer 2020, 1) that only sustained themselves on criminal behaviour and collaborators. This has often been accompanied by references to Stalinism and anti-Russian sentiment, particularly in Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltics. In other cases, such as in Ukraine, a series of 'decommunization' laws has also been aimed at building a new national narrative decoupled from the Soviet one (Myshlovska 2019). The most clear example of this is the highly publicized *Black Book of Communism* from 1997 that went as far as to suggest that communism might have been worse than Nazism as it lasted longer (Ghodsee 2014). Efforts to equivalate crimes of communism and Nazism (the so-called 'Double Genocide' thesis') in the European memory field have been aimed at inserting the eastern experience into the wider course of European memory and recognising the communist (and Soviet) victimization of the East on par with Nazi crimes (Gliszczyńska-Grabias 2016). Yet this simplified hegemonic narrative of totalitarian past has omitted important historical facts, including the various developments in the regime's character over time, and distorted the levels of local participation that would make the victimhood narrative more 'active', implicate a much wider set of population and distort the common binary victim-perpetrator narrative (cf. Rothberg 2019). Such a romanticized narrative of suffering that is out of one's control has provided moral high ground (as well as political leverage against internal and external opponents) as victims are generally seen as innocent and blameless.

Initially, the aim was to clearly distance the new political order from communism, anything Soviet (and subsequently Russian) and legitimize democratic and market institutions. This also included the opening of government-funded institutes of memory[8], museums, exhibitions and educational projects, making 'the "absolutist" rule of the national history paradigm … unequivocal ' (Kopeček 2008, 82). At the same time, this narrative justified the 'historical right' of the east of Europe to be recognized among the European

family as equals (see, for example, Mälksoo 2014). It has also structured policy choices linked to the Europeanization process with the attempt to insert the eastern victimhood narrative into the European memory framework. Indeed, European institutions have recognised that there was a need for the incorporation of the eastern experience and after 'heated' debates the European Parliament adopted the 'Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism', among other commemorative gestures (Sierp 2017, 448–49; see also Littoz-Monnet 2013). However, this narrative has been closely conditioned by the balance in political ruling coalitions, their complicity in the past regime as well as current political objectives. For example, until 2022, in Bulgaria where the Socialist Party still wields substantial political power, anti-communist rhetoric has been more muted at the top political levels. Conversely in Poland, the established images of the communist evil vs democratic good continue to dominate the public space. In other cases, such as the Baltics, Croatia, Serbia and Hungary, anti-communism has been increasingly redirected against opposition as a tool to legitimize the incumbents and devalue left-leaning opposition. At the time of writing in 2022, this narrative is being re-activated in some cases through the growing anti-Russian sentiment and opposition towards the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

Second, and related to the first, since the mid-2000s, sacrificial war victimhood has increasingly included distorted storylines of direct war suffering and crime perpetration in order to deflect local responsibility and diminish shame in reference to complicity, participation in mass crimes, or inaction. It has been linked to what some call 'patriotic' (Lagrou 1997) histories and 'moralistic interpretations of the past' (Kończal and Moses 2021, 2). Collective historical victimhood in World War II has effectively resulted in hegemonic narratives that include matching up national to Jewish suffering or at times even surpassing it (Radonić 2021; Subotić 2019). In the Czech and Slovak cases, this has resulted in what Sniegon (2014) called 'Jew-free' narratives of World War II or in Poland efforts to match up

3 million killed Jews with the same number of killed ethnic Poles (Grabowski 2016). The right-wing politics of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, which has since its first forays into high politics in mid-2000s attempted to outlaw any mention of Polish complicity in the killings of Jews during the Holocaust is a case in point. It insists on the portrayal of Poles as both resisters and the main victims of World War II (for polls, see Kucia, Duch-Dyngosz, and Magierowski 2013). In this case, victimhood thus also coexists with heroism. Yet this narrative has a long tradition (Lim 2021). It taps into a wider phenomenon of overlooking Jewish suffering (despite a growth in Holocaust education), simmering anti-Semitism and the powerful role of the Church (Behr 2021). It has also served a political purpose for PiS to discredit and demonize its vocal liberal opposition (Kapralski 2017). The resulting hegemonic narrative is so widespread that, as Holmgren put it, a more nuanced portrayal of Polish complicity 'would be hard for Poles to absorb in the most liberal political climate' (2019, 97).[9]

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine, where atrocities by nationalists during World War II have been nearly erased from textbooks and public spaces to celebrate sacrificial victimhood (Stan 2008; Koposov 2021). In Croatia and Serbia, the ruling right-wing parties have portrayed World War II suffering as a prequel and even justification for the 1990s wars, making a continuous succession of national war victimhood (Gordy 2013; Subotić 2019). Local nationalists have exerted concerted effort to portray their 'people' as the perennial victims while marginalizing minorities and the suffering of neighbours, without a clear recognition of responsibility or guilt (Djureinović 2020; Barton Hronešová 2020; David 2020). This has resulted in denial and relativization of war crimes and instrumental manipulation with historical facts. Such sacrificial war victimhood narratives have been convenient to escape shame (e.g., of collaboration, complicity, lack of help, crime perpetration) while inflating national pride and

honour (see Stone 2012). The current regime of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia has repeatedly campaigned on returning the Serbian nation its 'honour' (*ponos*) by propagating historical lies (Stakić 2022).

And finally, victimhood from maltreatment/humiliation has been present in situations when a nation is portrayed as being patronized or semi-colonized by more powerful states, especially in the West, a growing framing in the past decade. The ulterior motivation is often to shift the blame to a 'great power' (in this case mainly the US, UK, EU and NATO) for socio-economic underperformance to save national prestige and justify protectionist and often illiberal policies. This type of structural-historical victimhood has come to the forefront most prominently in response to the EU proposals regarding refugee quotas in 2015 and EU's opposition towards illiberal politicians. For example, during the 2015 refugee crisis, Hungarian state media and representatives compared the 'Brussels' quotas' to another western 'dictat' (Index 2015), linking it to the 1920 Trianon Treaty when Hungary lost 2/3 of its territory. Leveraging Trianon as the essential trauma of Hungarian society (Szeky 2014), the current regime of Viktor Orbán has framed most of its policies as countering the West and everything it represents, ranging from opposition towards 'banks', financial institutions, migration policies, liberals, 'rainbow' policies, academic institutions (especially gender studies), including George Soros and the Central European University (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Such rhetoric has portrayed Fidesz as protecting Hungarian and Christian values against immoral and demising West (Palonen 2018).[10] Christian ethics in this vein has also been linked to another trait of this narrative that shows the West as corrupting the East and 'stealing brains', that is the educated, and patronising the East with its human-rights discourse despite its colonial past (Rashkova 2021).

Yet Hungary is only one example among others (e.g. Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Serbia), where such victimhood tropes – to varying

degree and intensity – have been inserted in the playbook of the right-wing populist discourse. In the Western Balkans, the stalled EU enlargement process has acted as a conduit for such a narrative (Petsinis 2020). Essentially, the narrative suggests that the West has been structurally victimizing the East by imposing foreign policies, double standards, and corrupting mores, which local leaders rush in to oppose in order to protect national values.[11] Surprisingly, this has not led to 'hard' Euroscepticism that calls for leaving the EU. In fact, EU membership remains popular, mainly due to economic benefits (Wike et al. 2019). Instead, this rhetoric is part of a growth of 'soft' Euroscepticism, that is the politics of the EU and how it operates, especially in terms of interventions to national sovereignty (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). Moreover, this is a Europewide change. Hooghe and Marks noted already in 2007 that the 'defence of national community' has grown across Europe among those sceptical of the EU (2007, 121). This phenomenon is best manifested in notable shifts in votes for parties critical of the EU both at the domestic and EU levels.[12]

In sum, these three sub-narratives of the victimhood hegemonic meta-narrative manifest differently in each of the countries of the region at particular times, depending on the political climate, the ruling parties and other socio-political aspects to which I cannot do justice here. Each country will ultimately have its own victimhood meta-narrative that emphasises one storyline over others. When combined, though, they present a meta-narrative of victimhood with a hegemonic status that applies national suffering and injustice as a mechanism to deflect responsibility, guilt and shame while increasing national honour, pride and prestige and a tool to justify policies.[13] In other words, it is used for the purposes of ontological security and pragmatic politics. This development is, of course, understandable for countries still coming to terms not only with historical traumas but also with major transformations as such narratives ultimately reinforce a more stable national self-

understanding. However, the current growth in victimhood narratives is worrying as many often intersect with conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Conclusion

When Viktor Orbán commissioned a new monument for the victims of the 1944-5 German occupation in 2013, he not only embarked upon a manoeuvre to attract popularity before elections, but also leveraged a narrative of Hungarian victimhood during World War II. The monument erected in 2014 effectively reshaped national memory by portraying Hungarians as the main victim of the war while marginalizing the over 560,000 killed Jews in the Holocaust (Radonić 2021, 161–62). Despite opposition voices erecting a counter-memorial to set the record straight in front of the memorial, this episode launched a new victimhood narrative that has over the years become hegemonic, that is of Hungarian ethnic suffering in World War II above others. This way, Orbán not only scored political points, but also rebalanced Hungarian ontological security by deflecting guilt and providing moral high ground. This and other examples provided in this article demonstrate that despite the cosmopolitan nature of memory (Levy and Sznaider 2002), we cannot lose sight of the pervasive hegemonic narratives that become accepted as common-sensical, have the power to structure national understanding of self, and enhance a collective understanding of national belonging.

In eastern Europe, rather than yielding to the transitional and decentralized nature of memory, those who wield power or compete for it, have in fact increasingly reached out to uniting narratives to legitimize their political ambitions, justify their policies and increase a sense of majoritarian unity. This article showed how and which types of victimhood narratives have acted as conduits for political claims across the region, contributing to the growing literature on victimhood politics where victimhood is used as a narrative. At the backdrop of memory and ontological security scholarship, I argued that victimhood has

become a particularly widespread narrative, aimed at establishing moral high ground and deflecting guilt. I introduced three types of the most prevalent victimhood narratives with regards to their content and sources. I have also presented how each of these victimhood frames has had an instrumental objective but also contributed to ontological security. First, victimhood stemming from criminal totalitarian oppression has been collectively leveraged to insert east European states into the European family. Yet it has also been used to deflect any co-responsibility during communism in the region. Second, victimhood stemming from direct and historical war victimization has been used to showcase collective national sacrifice. The objective has not only been to rule out any direct participation in crimes (as victims are perceived as innocent) but also to increase national honour and pride. Finally, I identified a type of structural-historical victimhood of maltreatment and humiliation by more powerful western states and institutions that has also served its purpose. It has been instrumentally used to justify right-wing policy choices such as anti-immigration but also contributed to a defence of the national way of life, which has often resulted in neo-traditionalism and a colonial critique of the West (Bešlin et al. 2020). This last victimhood narrative is arguably on the rise across the region today, often linked to right-wing politics.

While east European leaders are not unique in engaging in victimhood politics, the region and its intricate and unsettled history provides a fertile and dangerous setting. Western pundits often portray eastern Europe as irrationally attached to its past narratives, historical injustice and victimhood. This alleged irrationality, though, needs to be understood at the backdrop of ontological insecurity of states whose self-understanding and autobiographies both internally and vis-à-vis other states have been repeatedly challenged and undermined by traumatic experiences and losses of territories.[14] The resonance of histories of violence and repression (wars and communism) as well the sceptical approach towards the often mis-placed western interventions across the region demonstrate some important and telling

commonalities that can be leveraged in comparative studies of the region. Yet these propositions have a worldwide application as we can find hegemonic narratives in any context where there is a need to increase self-esteem, status and prestige as well as in situations where political leaders reach out to victimhood narratives to legitimize their rule or justify their policies. In the most tragic instances, false narratives of victimhood can be hijacked and weaponized to justify wars as the regime of Vladimir Putin did in 2022 when invading Ukraine (cf. Mälksoo 2022).

The attraction and at the same time danger of hegemonic victimhood narratives is that they reduce existential anxieties and explain how and/or why we suffered – but often at the cost of (mis-)identifying an evil enemy. Such narratives are ultimately silencing for non-nationals and 'permanent minorities' (Mamdani 2020, 101), that is groups that are constantly excluded from the hegemonic narrative of suffering of the 'nation' – indigenous populations, minorities, refugees and immigrants. The futile pursuit of some perfect form of ontological security – though understandable – can often compromise the quality of inclusive democracy where all groups and individuals enjoy equal rights and where a certain fluid ontological insecurity is accommodated. National stories are ultimately about who is part of the 'founding national narratives' as these 'determine who is included in the polity, and on what basis' (Tudor and Slater 2021, 707). Indeed, while I showed that hegemonic narratives of victimhood are appealing to illiberal governments, they can be found anywhere, including in established democracies (cf. Gest 2016; Campbell and Manning 2018). Although dissonance and complexity are defining features of democracies, such simplified narratives can be comforting in their simplicity and uniformity. Explaining why a group suffered and at whose hand can reduce ontological anxieties, but if stripped of its contextual complexities, it can also increase polarization and marginalize alternative voices.

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Notes

[1] Tony Judt claims that by December 1967, Party members constituted 16.9% of the Czechoslovak population, highest in any postcommunist state (2005, 441 (ft 11)).

[2] Data by the Czech polling agency STEM show a relative constant negative evaluation of the communist regime, around 60 percent. See here: https://www.stem.cz/page/9/?s=re%C5%BEim

[3] Similar arguments were also put forward for some West European countries (Lagrou 1997).

[4] Following social psychology scholarship, I use the term 'victimization' to denote the original act of violence, harm and oppression while 'victimhood' denotes the narrative of the experience and its understanding (cf. Vollhardt 2020).

[5] Myth is a popular term that often assumes a hegemonic power (Bell 2003, 75). Jan Assman defines it as 'a story one tells to give direction to oneself and the world—a reality of higher order, which not only rings true but also sets normative standards and possesses a formative power' (2011, 59–60).

[6] Also international affairs can be 'hegemonized' by intellectuals (Persaud 2022).

[7] According to Pew Research compared to western Europe, many more East Europeans believe that birth and ancestry is important for national identification: ranging from the lowest among Slovaks (56%) to the highest in Romania (88%), Bulgaria (85%), Hungary (83%), Poland (82%) and the Czech Republic (78%) (Pew 2016).

[8] The Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes opened in 2007, tasked with studying crimes of Nazism and communism, to some degree mimicking other regional institutes of memory in Poland (1998), Hungary (2002) and Slovakia (2003).

[9] However, there are still some pockets of counter-narrative defiance, such as in the work of the Museum of the History of Jewish Poles and among important public intellectuals and historians.

[10] Anti-Muslim sentiment is prevalent across the region: only 17% of Czechs, 25% of Estonians and 33% of Poles would accept Muslim neighbours (Pew 2016).

[11] On the wider trends see Vachudova 2020; Enyedi 2020.

[12] CHES data when compared to electoral results confirms this trend (Bakker et al. 2019; 2020).

[13] The is a paucity of comparative polling data on narratives in the region; however European Social Values Survey and domestic polls offer some productive insights into the salience of narratives.

[14] Mitzen (2006) explains the alleged irrationality of 'intractable conflicts' when physical security is compromised for ontological security.

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