

# Internal Colonisation



[Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw](#)

Internal colonization is a term used in the social sciences and humanities to define the subordination of one European people to others in terms of 'colonialism'.

The prospect of 'intra-European colonization' was used for the first time to describe Ireland's subordination to the British Empire. It is in fact the example of Ireland that has inspired the production of a rich body of literature presenting this country as a victim of intra-European colonization [see Deane 1990]. However, from the beginning of the transformation of the political system in Europe's post-communist countries, the postcolonial perspective also began to be applied to the history and modern situation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Researchers dealing with 'internal European colonization' point to analogies between the policy pursued by colonial empires and that pursued by subordinate European and non-European nations. In their opinions, the CEE societies underwent similar processes to those of Europe's maritime colonies. In the case of CEE, the analogy argument can be traced down to at least three colonizing forces: the West (specifically German-speaking countries and, in general terms, European or even global modernity), the East (Russia and Soviet Union) and the countries in this region with imperial ambitions (Poland and Hungary). In addition, such arguments by analogy share an (often inexplicit) assumption that postcolonial theory helps to highlight issues overshadowed by more conventional notions used by the historiography of the region, such as foreign occupation, nation-building, totalitarianism, (post)communism, (post)socialism, and others. The second type of argumentation is more historical in its essence, placing CEE in a wider, global framework of colonization and decolonization processes. The most significant example of this argumentation is the research on parallels between colonialism and Nazism and the German concept of 'Mitteleuropa'. In the Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Slovenian and Croatian cases, German speaking countries have always been the main colonizing Western 'other'. Inspired by such a perspective, a number of authors have depicted the extreme version of biological racism that appeared in the twentieth century and the turning of CEE into a colonial

space and laboratory for the Nazi social and racial experiments as an evolution of nineteenth-century German cultural chauvinism, especially in Poland's case [see e.g. Nelson 2009].

One of the important elements of postcolonial narratives is a critique of 'Eurocentrism' [McLennan 2003]. However, from the point of view of researchers dealing with post-communist Europe, Eurocentrism is above all 'West-centrism'. This causes colonialism to be perceived almost exclusively through the prism of actions taken by Western European countries in relation to regions located outside of Europe. This perspective is based on a strict division of the East and West of Europe, which makes the experiences of Eastern European nations invisible from a postcolonial perspective [see Cavanagh 2004]. Thus, there is a noticeable diversity among descriptions of the phenomenon of 'intra-European colonization', which depends upon which colonizer we are dealing with. Researchers point out that the unconscious assumption in mainstream postcolonial reflection is that Western European countries are 'exemplary' colonial empires and hence the Russia/Soviet Union and Ottoman Empire do not appear in this paradigm [Tlostanova 2015]. This assumption is also based on the conceptual reduction of all empires to colonial ones although only some of them developed colonial structure and ideology.

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This happens, on the one hand, because the Ottoman Empire and Russia/Soviet Union are only presented as partially European countries or even as Asian ones, and attitudes to them are correspondingly diverse. For example, when Bulgaria was struggling against the influence of the Ottoman Empire, it perceived Russia as a European country that could provide it with support in its struggle against a culturally and religiously alien colonizer. Other nations subjected to similar pressure were in turn seeking support in Western Europe. It would therefore be necessary to distinguish the issue of 'the colonizing of European nations' from 'intra-European colonization'. From the point of view of CEE countries, however, the basic issue concerned was relations with Russia and the fact that their region was a collision point between the spheres of influence of Russia and those of the German-speaking imperial countries (whose Europeanness was not questioned).

On the other hand, thinkers from nations subordinate to the Soviet Union emphasize that it is difficult (for ideological reasons) for researchers supportive of postcolonial movements based on Marxism to perceive the communist country as an oppressive colonial empire [see Riabczuk 2015; Tlostanova 2015]. Researchers draw an analogy between the imperial policy of Tsarist Russia and the presence of a similar racist policy towards non-Christian peoples, which appeared in the activities of other colonial empires [Burbank, Cooper 2010; Tlostanova 2012, 2015].

Moreover, Russia's successor, the Soviet Union, is often seen as a colonial power that hid its colonial ambitions behind a 'smokescreen' of progressive ideology and the support it granted to the decolonization movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In fact, the Soviet empire reinforced tendencies like Russification, exploitation of the non-Russian republics, domination over countries in CEE, deportations and ethnic cleansing, forced labour and crimes against indigenous people [e.g. Korek 2007; Stefannescu 2012; Tlostanova 2012].

The third important (post)colonial approach relates to Poland and Hungary's own imperial ambitions. In the early modern era, at the peak of its territorial development, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth covered the greater part of today's Baltic states, as well as Belarus, Ukraine and some parts of Russia. After regaining independence in 1918, the Second Polish Republic still had significant territories in the East. Critical anthropology and culture studies point to the serfdom-based economy of this rural country and claim that divisions of its social structure among the gentry and peasants, and the cultural effects of these, were similar to those of the slave economies of colonial powers. They have also stressed the Orientalization or forced Polonization of various minorities, in particular the Ruthenians, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews [see Fiut 2003; Bakula 2006]. Moreover, the signs of nostalgia for a former 'empire' can still be seen today in some spheres of Polish

culture [see Mayblin et al. 2016]. Moreover, Hungary was an important political and cultural force that affected neighbouring nations, such as the Romanians, Slovaks and Croats. The disintegration of Hungary resulting from the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 and loss of two-thirds of its territory (which remains outside the Hungarian state to this day) is still a form of trauma for Hungarian society today [see Gerner 2007].

The postcolonial perspective allows the history of CEE to be placed within a global context of reflecting on global relations of power and subordination, as well as their lasting consequences. It can be perceived as a critical tool for defining political, economic and cultural dependencies and opposing them. In this respect, quite a distinct approach has emerged. It relates to the way the consequences of the 1989 breakthrough in CEE have been depicted by a branch of postcolonial theory cultivated by critical anthropology complementary to postsocialist studies. Although this approach was developed by a different group of scholars interested in different historical processes, it still engages with the way the notion of Western modernity was imposed on the region. In particular, critical anthropology has described the situation of 'transitional' societies – that have transformed from socialism to capitalism and dictatorship to democracy – as 'postcolonial' due to the teleological, modernizing and globalizing neoliberal tendencies that enjoyed a hegemonic position in the region at the time. The situation of

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CEE societies at that time has also sometime been termed 'neocolonial' due, on the one hand, to the presence and influence of advisors from international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank, who were advocating liberalization, democratization and marketization in the region at the same time and on the other hand, the internationalization of domestic policies caused by accession to the European Union. These processes are seen by some researchers as a new version of 'internal colonization' in which Western countries of the EU are placed in the role of colonizing powers [Buchowski 2006; Csepely, Örkény, and Scheppele 1996; Sowa 2011].

It is also worth noting that rejecting the framework of 'postcolonialism' has also recently become popular among authors studying various forms of socialism and post-socialism. In a foundational article, anthropologists Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery (2009) called for the liberation of "the Cold War from the ghetto of Soviet area studies and postcolonial thought from the ghetto of third world and colonial studies". They proposed that both terms, that is, 'post-socialism' and 'postcolonialism', be rejected in favour of working on a single broader framework enabling the exploration of Cold War ideology's effects worldwide. Such a framework may be established by the 'post-dependency' paradigm, which has been developed to encompass different forms of dependency,

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processes of liberation and the social, political and cultural transformation of subaltern nations [see Zarycki 2016].

Although the postcolonial discourse on Central and Eastern Europe is still barely present in the mainstream of postcolonial literature, it is flourishing among researchers dealing with the problems of the region. It should be noted, however, that the Eastern European postcolonization literature is extremely diverse and elaborated by representatives of various disciplines (including sociologists, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, Slavists and historians) who often classify different phenomena using the same term – 'postcolonialism'. One example of this diversity is the application of the term 'internal colonisation' to social and class differences rather than those arising from nation or state of origin. The creator of this approach is the Russian researcher Alexander Etkind (2013), who presents Russia as a country colonizing its own citizens, who are in turn defined by the elites not in terms of their nationality or race but in terms of class differences. However, this approach is criticized because it conceals the fact that Russia and the Soviet Union have been pursuing a policy of Russification towards ethnic and religious groups based on discrimination and racism [Tlostanowa 2015]. In the Polish scholarly discourse, an 'internal colonisation approach' based on the assumption that cultural elites colonize all other



social strata, destroying their cultural diversity, is primarily represented by Tomasz Zarycki (2008).

CEE researchers' adoption of a postcolonial perspective indicating the existence of the phenomenon of 'internal European colonisation' has a deep critical potential and moral dimension. Colonialism has been assessed globally as a negative phenomenon and the use of expressions from the postcolonial studies in relation to European countries that implement imperial policies reinforces any negative assessment of their actions. This is particularly important in the case of Russia (especially as the Soviet Union used to describe itself during the Communist Era as a country opposed to the politics of the Western imperial colonial powers). The positioning of the 'subaltern' as a victim of colonialism is therefore a moral position and, like every victim's position in the modern world, it enables the building of moral capital that can be later used in domestic and international politics [Lim 2010; Łuczewski 2017].

Processes of internal colonisation produced heritage which is still problematic for CEE countries such as Poland. An example here could be Warsaw, where the long presence of Russia and the Soviet Union has left its mark on the city landscape (in the form of technical infrastructure, buildings, monuments, Orthodox churches and cemeteries). After the beginning of the socio-political transformation, only monuments were removed as a visible element of the symbolic domination of Soviet

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Union in the city space. However, the main symbol of Russian domination – citadel which was a military base and a prison – has become the subject of the heritage [reframing](#) practices. Referring on the moral argument – that is, giving justice to the victims of Russian colonialism – the Polish authorities transformed the citadel into a museum dedicated to the victims of Russian and Soviet imperialism. At the same time, a museum of Polish history is being created there, which is supposed to show Polish resistance to hostile colonial politics of neighboring empires.



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