“White Normativity” and Eastern Europe: Old victims or new oppressors?

Abstract: Countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not as familiar with the phenomenon indicated by the concept of “white normativity” as countries of so-called Western Europe. The main reason for this is that the thesis of so-called colonial history of Europe does not hold for Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, significant segments of society in countries of Central and Eastern Europe a priori reject a focus on the world and social reality of which concepts such as “white normativity” are representative. It is rather necessary to consider other models of interpreting the current situation of these countries. It therefore seems more feasible to work with the anti-oppressive theory, as it is developed in sociology and especially in social work. Thus the history of Central and Eastern Europe in the course of the 20th century can be interpreted as a history of oppression generating further oppression, a history in which the victims become new aggressors, a history in which the abuse of elementary principles ultimately leads to abusing them further.

Countries of so-called Eastern Europe, although it would be more appropriate to speak of Central and Eastern Europe, are not as familiar with the phenomenon indicated by the concept of “white normativity” as countries of so-called Western Europe. The main reason for this is that the thesis of so-called colonial history of Europe does not hold for Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, significant segments of society in countries of Central and Eastern Europe a priori reject a focus on the world and social reality of which concepts such as “white normativity” are representative. Thus, in this study I am aiming at clarifying the roots and context of such scepticism to concepts such as ‘White Normativity’. Using examples of several other terms I show that in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe there exist completely different narratives and ideological concepts. The second part of the study focuses on interpreting these Eastern European narratives with regards to specific forms of spirituality and religiosity in Eastern Europe. Despite the secularisation pressure of former communist regimes in Eastern Europe, religiosity and spirituality, or rather their specific forms, continue to play a very important role in the formation of people’s feelings and stances in the population. The third part of the study, a discussion, focuses on a possible interpretation of the previous analysis, especially with regard to the examples of ‘small islands of strength’.

1) Speaking of “White Normativity” in Eastern Europe is problematic

The former Austro-Hungarian Empire and its successor states in middle and east Europe have never been colonial superpowers in the same sense as Great Britain, France, Spain or the Netherlands. Their experience with overseas was always merely commercial and thus mediated. This held also at the time when Austria-Hungary controlled important ports of South Europe such as Trieste, Pula and others. The narrative of Central and Eastern Europe is therefore different (Brix, Busek 2018). From the point of view of the colonial history of Europe it could rather deal with the question of the extent to which individual European countries, such as the Czech lands, Croatia, Slovakia, etc., were Austro-Hungarian colonies. Going into older history, we may ask whether
countries such as Croatia, Slovakia, Poland or Austria were Czech colonies when at the time of the High Middle Ages Czech kings such as Ottokar II or Charles IV ruled from Prague over an area comparable to or even larger than the later Austria-Hungary. But in Central and Eastern Europe this question is not and cannot be posed in this way. The relationships between states and nations were ordered differently than they were in the colonies of the states of Western Europe. An exception is modern history which allows us to ask whether countries such as the former Czechoslovakia, former Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, etc., were colonies of the Soviet Union. However, in the past decade we have seen that within the context of this narrative a colonial role is ascribed to the European Union and its leader states, especially Germany. While for example within the so-called Visegrad Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and in the relationships of its member states to states such as Slovenia or Croatia and partially also to Austria, the EU is conceived as a desired and expedient coexistence of different national states in one geographical area, with respect to the central authorities of the EU and its dominant states the colonial narrative is applied. The EU is also compared to the Soviet Union and its “colonial” effort (Adler 2018), even though most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were members of the Warsaw Pact and are today members of the EU and NATO, never were part of the Soviet Union. An important conclusion follows from this, namely that the mentality prevalent in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe is rather the mentality of colonial oppression victims, which has an entirely practical impact on the public and political discourse on key issues and on interpreting the events of the present world.

So opening the issue of “white normativity” in the contemporary social context of Central and Eastern European countries, standing up for accepting refugees, or merely regarding refugeeism and migration as one of the gravest problems of the contemporary world gets one in an awkward situation. As the results of various social investigations as well (i.e. Standard Eurobarometer 89 2018 or European Demographic Datasheet 2018) as the results of various kinds of elections have shown, the societies of the individual states are polarised into two basic positions (Mijnssen 2018). One can be characterised as a position immuring itself against everything foreign, a priori rejecting social change and the impacts of world development, rejecting the findings of humanities and social sciences – e.g. regarding the social construction of reality. The other position is open both to foreign influence and to social change and development, striving for rational and objective assessment of these and of information. The first position fears “colonisation” on the part of the EU, the other position points out the “colonising” efforts of present-day Russia. This polarisation leads to a positional fight in the whole-society discourse and political debates.

In Czech colloquial usage several neologisms have appeared in recent years, labelling and defaming the second – open and critical – position. These are terms such as “sunny-boy”, “Havlist” or even “good-shitter”, which are difficult to translate to a foreign language and explain.

- “Sunny-boy” – The concept is intended as a parody and caricature of the principally positive attitude to one’s environment, which is also manifested by active involvement for the benefit of others. It is a shift in the meaning of the adjective “naive”, as if it was an imaginary fourth degree beyond “most naive”.

- “Havlist” – The concept derives from a critical interpretation of the activity of Václav Havel, the former president of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic. Even at the time of his active political career Václav Havel did not have only positive renown in the Czech Republic. It is logical and understandable that he was criticised by his opponents within legitimate political discussion. When time has elapsed it is also evident that not all of his decisions and of the measures he took as head of state were always the most felicitous solution. But at the same time a part of the population projects onto him, as on a former
head of state, its frustrations brought about by the process of the transformation of state, economy and society from the socialist order to a democratic state with a market economy and a democratic division of power. These changes had a number of “victims”, i.e., persons who lost their social status or work, who had to give up their former way of life, or were brought by their former way of life to the margins of society. Even though the president of ČR even today has no factual influence over processes of this kind and his role as head of state is in fact representative and ceremonial, at least a part of the population still projects their frustrations and hopes of the type described above onto the person of the president as head of state. This fact is still abused by the opponents of Václav Havel from among politicians, especially by those who set their stakes on populism. So the term “Havlist” labels and defames those who feel akin to Václav Havel in their opinions and/or principally agree with the political direction he represented.

- “Good-shitter” – The concept is in fact vulgar, or is derived from a vulgar word. That unequivocally determines its meaning as an aggressive term, intended to offend those who are labelled by it. It is close in meaning to the generally better known term “good-doer” characterising the effort to do good at all cost: without premeditation, without proper reflection, subjectively and on a purely emotional basis, i.e., without clear and justifiable criteria regarding what is good and what is not, and without evaluating what particular impact the action will have. When the concept of “good-doer” is shifted to the vulgar level, it again becomes a means of attacking others and a principal expression of disagreement with interest in others and helping others.

With respect to the colonial history of Europe it therefore holds that in the EU states of Central and Eastern Europe a narrative of colonial oppression victims prevail, having no factual justification, and also that this narrative leads the persons involved in it to take aggressive positions calling for the oppression anything that differs from the traditions and customs of Central and Eastern Europe (Pew Research Center 2017). So when societies in the EU states of Central and Eastern Europe are confronted e.g. with a phenomenon such as the culmination of the migration crisis in 2015, they do not perceive it through the prism of the colonial history of Europe, because they are not even capable of such perception. Rather, they perceive it through the prism of a victim who, having overcome the greatest problems, i.e., the period of transformation, must face new colonisation attempts. One of these may even be the refugee crisis itself, interpreted as a colonisation of the EU by Muslims (Zulehner 2016), or disputes between old and new, Western and Eastern EU states, interpreted as the colonial dictate of Brussels and Berlin (Opatrný 2016A). With respect to what has been said it is necessary to state that the differences between so-called Western and Eastern Europe even within the EU almost thirty years after the Iron Curtain fell are greater than they may have seemed to be in recent years.

2) Secularity and religiosity in Eastern Europe

The claim that the differences between Eastern and Western EU are greater than they at first glance seem to be is confirmed also by comparing the results of three surveys regarding migration and the refugee crisis carried out in 2015 and 2016 in Austria, Germany, Czech Republic and Slovakia (Opatrný 2016A), (Zulehner 2016). These surveys were mutually inspired and worked, among others, with the issue of spirituality and religiosity in the individual states in which the surveys were carried out, aiming especially at establishing the attitudes of Christians. Processing the results into clusters labelled Welcoming, Scepticism and Rejection has shown that there are significant differences between the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the one hand and Austria and Germany
on the other, but also that, unlike Austria and Germany, there are also differences in attitudes between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Graph 1 show how the individual clusters compare.

Graph 1 – Division of clusters in the three partial studies

In Graph 1 the differences as to which of the clusters is dominant are worth noticing. While in Austria and Germany the attitude of Welcoming is clearly dominant, in the Czechia and Slovakia it is not the opposite attitude of Rejecting, but the attitude of Scepticism. Another significant difference is that while in Slovakia the difference between the attitudes of Scepticism and Rejection is negligible, in the Czechia it is more than 15%. These differences, and the attitudes expressed by the clusters Scepticism and Rejection, are caused by several different kinds of fears, as the study has shown.

Already older investigations into spirituality and religiosity in countries such as the Czechia and Slovakia, but also in Poland, Hungary or states of the former Yugoslavia confirmed that certain kinds of fear are present in the societies of those states, regardless of whether it is a Catholic state, such as Poland, or a secularised one, such as the Czechia. These are fears associated with the process of transformation and a lower standard of living, as well as existential fears, especially the fear of death, the fear that I will come up short in my life, the fear of one’s own futility and uselessness (Tomka, Zulehner 2000), (Tomka, Zulehner 1999).

Similar conclusions were reached by the recently published investigation of the American Pew Research Center (2017) focusing on religion and national belonging in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Its results have shown that differences in opinion on particular issues are not always associated merely with professing a religion, but also with a certain historical experience. This is clear in the case of the Czechia, which is the only one of the investigated post-communist countries where no religious denomination prevails. 72% of the population do not profess a religion. In the other countries Orthodox or Catholic Christianity is dominant, or they
are religiously pluralist countries where Orthodox and/or Catholic Christianity exist side by side with a Protestant tradition or with Islam. The opinions of the inhabitants of the Czechia differ significantly from the views of respondents in other countries only regarding attitude to religion and regarding issues to which a moral significance is assigned by religions. These are especially pre-marital sexual relations, use of artificial contraception, tolerance to homosexual relationships and an open attitude to their legalisation (in the Czech Republic registered partnership has existed since 2006) and tolerance to abortion and divorce, or in other words rejecting a morally negative evaluation of abortion and divorce. 87% of Czechs also believe that it is not necessary to believe in God in order to live a moral life and adhere to good values. On the other hand, in issues such as accepting refugees, trust in democracy, positive attitude to national, religious and cultural plurality among citizens of the state, etc. the views of Czechs do not differ from the views of respondents from other post-communist states in any way. Much more positive stances on these issues are taken e.g. by the inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula from countries of the former Yugoslavia, in particular Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. As a result of their history, all these states are strongly religious and at the same time nationally, culturally and religiously pluralist.

In countries of Central and Eastern Europe religion used to serve as a means of delineating borders in a cultural and national sense. It is particularly clear in the case of Poland, which is well known for the close interconnection of national culture with the Catholic religion. This is due to Poland’s position between Orthodox Russia and the predominantly Protestant eastern part of Germany. Thus the Catholic identity of the nation has to do with its self-definition against its geopolitically dominant neighbours. The prevalent secular worldview in the Czech Republic must be understood along similar lines (Václavík 2010). Czech culture is too far removed from the culture of Russia and the culture of other traditionally Orthodox countries. But at the same time it had to bear up against the much stronger influence of Catholic and Protestant culture in the course of its history. This is due, among others, to its position, as it is wedged in the German space between two of its constituent states which are traditionally different – the traditionally Catholic Bavaria and the traditionally Protest Saxony, which until the end of World War II reached deep into the area of the present Poland, so that the present Czech Republic bordered in the north mostly on Saxony. In the modern era the Czech lands belonged to the traditionally Catholic Habsburg monarchy. The self-definition of Czech national identity in the 19th and 20th centuries was therefore based on an opposition to everything German, even to the German language itself, which was the main official language of the multi-national state. That is why ultimately the self-definition of Czech national identity necessarily meant defining itself both against the Bavarian and Austrian Catholicism and against the Saxon Protestantism.

So if religion or a particular Christian denomination and possibly also a secular worldview in Central and Eastern Europe serve as means of defining own identity, it is plain enough that regardless of the level of religiosity refugees from Muslim countries, or refugees of Muslim religion, will be rejected in these countries. Of course, it is not merely a matter of rejecting Muslims as such, rather of rejecting anything that is unknown and foreign.

### 3) Old victims – new tyrants

It is evident that the contemporary opinion currents in Central and Eastern Europe necessarily have to do with interpreting the history of these states. This issue was skilfully handled, among others, by the communist propaganda, which was able to cultivate the post-war aversion to all that is German for decades and transfer it to the rest of Western Europe and the USA. At that time religions played the important part of an ideological counterbalance to communist ideology (Weis
2013). That, however, reinforced their role as a well-established means of defining identity. Today this phenomenon can be observed in the traditionally Catholic countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the unconcealed and public opposition to the attitudes and opinions of Pope Francis. It can be even more significant that it is mostly not so much opposition as an elementary misunderstanding of the Pope’s conception of the Church and its mission in the world (Scavo, Beretta 2018). Religion, which in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the modern era and the 20th century, helped to form and reinforce, develop and defend the identity of those who found themselves in the wheelwork of history and of the disputes of their more powerful neighbours, or merely became the object of their desire for power, is becoming an instrument of oppressing all that is different (Snyder 2012).

In the case of the Czech Republic, where this part is taken by the secular worldview, it is evident in various surveys, for example in the survey commissioned in 2015 by the public service Czech Television (Fokus Václava Moravce 2015). The survey was carried out at the beginning of the year, i.e., before the refugee crisis broke out. As Graph 2 shows, already at that time the Czechs had the worst attitudes to Arabs and Roma, whereby only several hundreds of thousands of Roma, i.e., 1.2-2.2% live in the Czech Republic (Hlaváček 2014) and less than 1% of Arabs (Pew Research Center 2017).

Graph 2 – Attitudes of Czech people to different nationalities and minorities

![Graph showing attitudes to different nationalities and minorities](image_url)

Source: Median for Czech Television, Broadcast: Focus Václava Moravce, March 2015

So rejecting or downright oppressing all that is different and foreign in countries of Central and Eastern Europe is not and cannot be interpreted through the prism of colonial history. Similarly, it is not quite appropriate to apply the concept of “white normativity” to Central and Eastern Europe.
It is rather necessary to consider other models of interpreting the history of these countries, especially the one in which the victim of oppression becomes the oppressor when the situation changes. Of course, normal psychological categories cannot be applied to collective and cultural consciousness or to the history of a nation. It therefore seems more feasible to work with the anti-oppressive theory, as it is developed in sociology and especially in social work (Matoušek 2012). The anti-oppressive theory is based on three principles: justice, equality and participation. The first of these – justice – places emphasis on protecting the dignity and respecting the rights (human and civil) of the client. The second principle – equality – states that no one may be intentionally disadvantaged; it therefore wants to emphasise not only respecting rights, but also equality of opportunities. The last principle – participation – assumes an active attitude; the client must participate in solving his life situation, he must cooperate with the helper (Thompson 2000). It is significant that the former communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe never observed any of the three principles of anti-oppressive theory, but always loudly professed them and extensively interpreted them to support their power claim (Courtois 1999). Thus, justice was understood as class justice, i.e., a justice denying any rights to those who did not belong to the elect class of workers and peasants. The principle of equality was also frequently emphasised, but in practice it was always understood in the Orwelian sense that even though all are equal, some – e.g. Communist Party members – are more equal. Finally, participation was a highly desired principle, when the active and conscious involvement of citizens in public happenings and community activities was expected, but always and exclusively only according to the priorities stipulated by the governing Communist Party, or by its local and regional representatives.

Thus all these principles, which it is desirable to apply in modern liberal democracies in order to integrate the marginalised into society, were robbed of content by the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (Svoboda 2013). That is why people in Central and Eastern Europe are distrustful of them in the spirit of the principle of preliminary caution. Further, if they are extensively interpreted today, for example in the critical theory of sociology or by some activists, the old communist rhetoric seems to come alive again in the eyes and ears of inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe – a rhetoric that never wanted to observe the principles it professed. This suspicion is then transferred for example to EU authorities. Thus the a priori distrust of the principles of justice, equality and participation disables their balanced grasp and adequate application, and consequently leads to negating them as a principle. As a result, Central and Eastern Europe has again seen the rise of an understanding of these principles which is adapted to the benefit of those who hold power in the democratic state, i.e., the citizens of a national state. Hence, justice and equality hold only for those who are at home here, participation is abandoned in favour of supporting populist politicians or is transformed into efforts to set up and arm illegal patrols and militia.

Thus the history of Central and Eastern Europe in the course of the 20th century can be interpreted as a history of oppression generating further oppression, a history in which the victims become new aggressors, a history in which the abuse of elementary principles ultimately leads to abusing them further.

4) Small islands of strength

Nonetheless, even in Central and Eastern Europe small islands of strength can be found, in which religion has played an important part, e.g. even in the secularised milieu of the Czech Republic. As already indicated, Czechs have least sympathy for Roma and Arabs, and for refugees. Despite
that there are purely secular organisations, as well organisations founded by Christians, which have been able to successfully work with Roma and refugee issues.

In the case of Roma it is the organisation Český západ o.p.s. (Czech West), active in the Carlsbad region, which carries out successful community work with unemployed Roma living in social excluded localities in the country. This organisation is based on the effort of the Trappist order, which found a place for its first monastery in the Czech Republic in West Bohemia and strives to revitalise the region (Havrdová 2013), badly marked by the expulsion of Germans from the Czech Republic after World War II.

In the Protestant milieu the foundation Generation 21 was established to help refugees. It was able to negotiate the transport of more than a hundred Christians from Iraq with the government with the vision that this will open up the way to the Czech Republic for refugees from the Near East and Africa. Since a part of the transported families returned to Iraq or illegally crossed the border to Germany, the state withdrew moral and legal support from the project. Nonetheless, the project gained extensive support among Christians of all denominations (Opatrný 2016B).

The two examples show that even in the secularised milieu of a European region where religion, or the secular worldview, has always served in defining the own identity against the surroundings and against everything foreign, it is still possible that religion becomes a solidarizing and transformative power (Zulehner 1996) and that individual projects gain public respect and support.

**Bibliography**


